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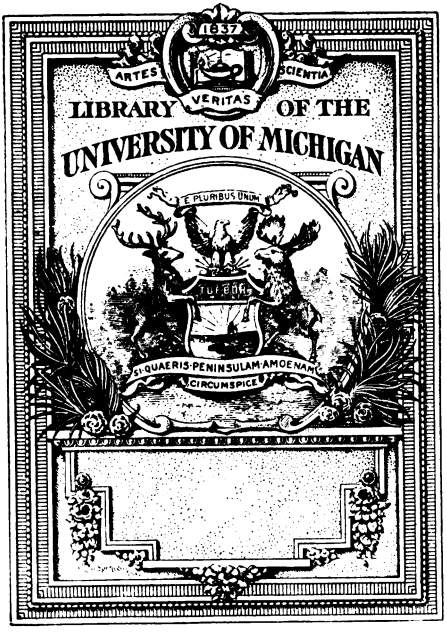
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A FALLEN IDOL

A FALLEN IDOL

BY
F. ANSTEY

AUTHOR OF 'VICE-VERSA' 'THE GIANT'S ROBE' &c.

A NEW EDITION

LONDON
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1902

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TO

MRS. PANTON

THIS BOOK

WHICH OWES ITS EXISTENCE TO HER SUGGESTION

IS

GRATEFULLY AND CORDIALLY INSCRIBED

BY HER VERY SINCERE FRIEND

THE AUTHOR

194337

CONTENTS.

		PAGE
	THE PROLOGUE	1

THE STORY.

CHAPTER		
I.	SELF-RESTRAINT	34
II.	A REMONSTRANCE	51
III.	FROM A PEDESTAL	66
IV.	LAST TOUCHES	89
V.	EXPLANATIONS	101
VI.	THE PRIVATE VIEW	121
VII.	A PAINFUL INTERVIEW	140
VIII.	REOPENED WOUNDS	156
IX.	PUT TO THE TEST	174
X.	CONVICTION	189
XI.	MYSTIFICATIONS	202
XII.	FOR OLD SAKE'S SAKE	219
XIII.	IN WHICH THE LUCK TURNS MORE THAN ONCE	241
XIV.	ANTÆUS THE SECOND	261
XV.	THE DAY AFTER	280
XVI.	BRAVED!	302
XVII.	BRUTUM FULMEN	313

A FALLEN IDOL.

THE PROLOGUE.

SCENE, *India.* TIME, *Eighteenth Century.*

IN the cool of an early morning, more than a hundred years ago, an elderly priest was sitting under the pilastered portico of a little temple, just outside the village of Chandra-gurry, in Southern Mysore.

It was the ordinary village of the place and period, fortified by a low mud wall, and consisting of lines of two-storied houses, gay with broad vertical stripes of red and white, and roofed with tile or ragged Palmyra leaves. On three sides it was surrounded by peepul and tamarind groves, and level plantations of rice, cotton, and millet, intersected by gleaming water-channels; on the other, the ground rose, by gradual slopes and plateaux, with stretches of velvety grass and stately trees, towards the rugged heights beyond.

The temple stood on a knoll at the head of the first of these slopes—a graceful building, with its cluster of snow-white domes arranged in pyramid form, crowned by

an elaborately carved pinnacle, upon which rose a pole, ending in a gilded ball.

It was not an orthodox Hindu temple—that was down below, a great staring structure of red granite dominating the humble roofs of the village—it was the place of worship for such portion of the population as belonged to the sect of Jains. The Jains profess a perverted form of Buddhism, under which reverence is claimed for no less than seventy-two earthly Buddhas—namely, twenty-four of a past era, twenty-four of the present, and twenty-four who are still to come. These Buddhas they call 'Jinas,' 'Arhats,' or 'Tirthankars;' they are saints who have lived on earth as mere mortals, but who have vanquished vice and virtue, and obtained *nirvâna*, or emancipation from further existence on earth.

The last saint of the present era was Mahâvîra, who was translated more than two thousand years ago. To him this particular temple had been dedicated, and his image consequently was the largest and the most luxuriously installed in the idol chamber, where each of the twenty-four was represented in effigy.

The temple was the private property of the old priest, Acharya Chick, who, though subject to the supervision and control of the head guru of the Jains, was free in most respects to conduct his ministrations as he pleased.

Chick, however, being a good and earnest old man, with the simplicity of a child, was strictly conscientious in the performance of his duties, took an honest pride in the appointments of his temple, and derived no more than a modest livelihood from his priestly calling.

As he sat outside on the stone bench, where he was accustomed to collect his thoughts for the service which began the working day, he was troubled by doubts and perplexities which had only of late begun to assail his tranquil faith.

Quite recently he had been called upon to include a new saint in his Pantheon, and to one of his conservative instincts, this was disturbing.

It came about in this wise. Some twenty years or so before, a lad had run wild about the village bazaar; he was of unknown parentage, and adopted by one of the workers in brass who formed a section of the inhabitants and were Jains to a man.

There was nothing, to an uninitiated eye, to distinguish him from other naked children, unless it was the superior force of will and ingenuity which procured him the leadership in all mischievous enterprises, until one day, when the guru from the Jaín head-quarters at Belligola came over on his periodical visit of inspection and made a startling discovery.

It was two thousand years, as has been said, since the last tirthankar of the present era had passed away, and the first of the succeeding one was already considerably overdue.

Now the guru had perceived that this expected tirthankar had actually taken up his mortal habitation in the body of this lad! There could be no possible mistake on this point, for the body bore every one of the mystic signs and marks which denoted his high mission.

This revelation, as might be expected, made all the

difference in the world to the youth's prospects. For he could not be left to develop unaided—since he might conceivably fail, and then all the business of incarnating a tirthankar would have to be gone through over again; he must be trained, and trained carefully.

So they put him under fit teachers, and the mystic name of Chalanka was conferred upon him, and he studied natural magic, in which he soon became a proficient, at the feet of an eminent *yogi* of great sanctity and uncleanliness.

It was said, indeed, that Chalanka did not invariably make the highest use of his occult knowledge, and that his miracles, to the end of his days, rather resembled the more ill-natured kind of practical joke; but these miracles will have that tendency when the saint is enthusiastic and young.

Chalanka grew up strong, bold, by no means uncomely, and in time he passed his novitiate, becoming a *yati* or ascetic of the first class; he cut off his hair, wore robes of a tawny hue—which became much tawnier—and confined his personal luggage to a bundle of peacock's feathers and an earthen pot.

He devoted his energies to contemplating the abstract, which he did with perseverance and entire success; he overcame all human passions and infirmities—for that was expected from him—and he trained himself to regard his body as a bubble, though it need hardly be said it was a bubble which had no connection whatever with soap.

And from time to time he stalked through the Jain quarter of the village, blowing a chank shell to attract

attention, and soliciting the alms of the charitable, and occasionally his wanderings led him unconsciously around the compound of the big Brahman temple, much to the annoyance of the priests and the amusement of the dancing girls.

Years went on, and his wisdom was pronounced ripe for gathering; he had his remaining hairs plucked out by the roots; he unrobed at his simple meals, and disciples were told off to attend upon him, to hearken to his discourses and store them up for future transmission.

Unfortunately no records have been preserved of his doctrines, which seem to have been found too complicated or too advanced to be divulged at present. All that is known of him at this stage is that he inspired his disciples with a salutary fear.

Another period elapsed, and Chalanka dismissed his grateful disciples, and established himself in a sort of hermitage up amongst the rocks, where he was to remain for years, silent, in self-centred contemplation.

He was not often to be seen there by the curious, for he possessed the power of making himself invisible. Sometimes at night in the thicket near the Brahman temple a shadowy form was seen gliding and prowling, the projection from the holy hermit who sat like stone in the cell far above among the heights; sometimes, a fierce wild laugh rang out over the crags and cliffs, and those who heard knew then that Chalanka was in one of his holy frenzies, and would not have disturbed him for their lives.

And then, in the most unforeseen way—he died. They

found his corpse lying stiff and swollen at the foot of a precipice, which, had he been an ordinary person, it would have been said he had fallen over.

Now nobody had expected him to die for years to come, still less to cease from existence with such an entire absence of parade; but he was the first of the new era, and consequently entitled to make his own precedents. He was obviously dead, and the only thing to be done was to burn his body and cast the ashes into water.

Chalanka's untimely end brought to the surface a question which many had secretly entertained in his lifetime. Was he, in sober truth, a tirthankar at all? Compared with his predecessors, he did not show to great advantage; his fame was limited, his supernatural feats were of a low and even pettifogging order, and he had enriched the faith with no fresh precepts of any value.

And those, too, who had had opportunities of observing him (amongst whom was Acharya Chick himself) could not but see certain shortcomings—a disposition to arrogance, for instance, a hankering after admiration, traces of greed, unscrupulousness, cruelty, which, without being serious in themselves, were slightly inconsistent with a complete conquest of the flesh.

Upon the whole, a dead man has perhaps a better chance of being canonised if the matter is postponed for a hundred years, as in the Roman Catholic faith, than when, as here, his claims must be settled at his decease; but none of Chalanka's co-religionists chose to play the *advocatus diaboli* in this case, feeling that his admission amongst the Jain divinities would reflect distinction upon

the village and temple, and not improbably have a stimulating effect upon the brass-founding trade, in which they were all largely interested.

And the head guru, to whom the point was referred, not unnaturally backed his original opinion; Chalanka was a genuine arhat, the first of a new order, and, as such, he was entitled to the reverence of all devout Jains, and an image must consequently be set up in his honour, and assigned a niche in the temple of his native village.

The guru's decision was of course final, the idol-carver was set to work, and soon produced a small seated image, which was as faithful a representation of the real Chalanka as could be expected or desired.

The new idol had only spent one night under the temple roof on the morning which witnessed Acharya Chick's perplexity beneath the portico—a perplexity of which it was the unconscious cause.

For the worthy Jain, though too humble-minded to think of questioning, even to himself, the wisdom of his superior, could not consider his latest deity an acquisition. His little Pantheon had been quite large enough before; he was too old to relish having a new object of veneration thrust upon him in this way.

And so, in apportioning the day's offerings on the previous evening, he had, without perhaps any conscious intention, reserved the least tempting fruits and the more faded flowers as the share of the new comer; and now he was not quite certain whether he felt more self-reproach or repugnance as the time drew near when he must again enter the inner shrine.

However, these unpleasant meditations of his were to receive as unpleasant an interruption. From his seat he could command a view of the winding path which led up the knoll from the village gates, and now he saw advancing a tall and stately figure, in which his eyes were keen enough to recognise his bitterest enemy, Ram Chunga, the Brahman who presided over the massive temple where Brahma, and Siva and Parvati, and Geneswara, their son, were worshipped.

He was evidently coming to the Jains' temple; he was almost at the palisade already, and Chick felt a certain flutter at the prospect of such a visitor, much as might a Dissenting minister of the old school on seeing a shovel hat and a pair of gaiters coming down his garden path.

The minister feels he has as good a right to the title of 'reverend' as the bishop; but then, he is only too well aware that the bishop is of a different opinion. So Acharya Chick claimed to be of the Brahman caste, and had an uncomfortable suspicion all the time that Ram Chunga would probably deny his right to any caste worth belonging to.

He thought he could guess the other's errand. It had come to Ram Chunga's ears that the Jain temple contained, as such buildings frequently did, an exceedingly handsome image of Siva, and on one or two occasions when the rival priests had met in the bazaar the Brahman had made offers to purchase an idol which, as he urged, could be but out of place in an alien sanctuary.

That Ram Chunga had any real wish to acquire the

Siva was more than the Jain could believe; he was probably acting out of pure aggravation, or with a tyrannical desire to dictate and domineer, which Chick was determined to withstand, even while his mild and gentle nature shrank from the impending wrangle.

As the Brahman came in with a general and highly offensive air of precaution against moral and physical contamination, the Jain rose and saluted him as courteously as he could bring himself to do.

Ram Chunga declined the seat which the other indicated on the stone bench, and, remaining at some distance, began by saying that the errand which alone could bring him to such a place would probably be guessed.

If, said the Jain, his visitor had come to renew his offer to purchase the Siva, he must, with every respect, make the same answer as before.

The Brahman replied that he no longer proposed to purchase the image; he now demanded that it should be surrendered to him without a price.

That, said Acharya Chick, was obviously unjust. The Siva was his own, he had brought it at his own expense from one of the Jain temples at Padan-guddy, how then could the Brahman claim it from him?

As the ministrant of Siva, the azure-throated, Ram Chunga replied, it was intolerable to him to know that the image of that mighty one was forced to share the offerings and suffer the companionship of such a herd of insignificant little demigods as he understood were venerated in the temple of the Jain.

To which Acharya Chick answered peaceably that his brother was mistaken. It was true indeed that many of the Vedantic emblems were to be found in Jain temples, and he instanced Brahma, Indra, Indrani, and the bull Nandi, as well as Siva; but they were not at any time considered as more than *devatas* or attendants upon the various tirthankars, and this particular image of Siva was a mere ornament, and never received offerings or adoration.

His reply did not improve matters, for the Brahman retorted that this only increased the impiety. Why should Siva go unhonoured while these tawdry little tirthankars were loaded with gifts? Which were more powerful, a handful of deified men or a god who was before all things began?

'You mistake, Ram Chunga, you do not grasp the spirit of our creed' (the Brahman's thin lips curled contemptuously); 'we lay our humble tributes of fruit and flowers before the emblems of these our arhats, the pure existences, the sages, the teachers, but with no purpose to please or propitiate. They themselves are infinitely beyond our poor homage; but to honour what is pure and good is beneficial in itself, and acts of devotion purify the heart, though there is no other reward.'

'And this newest god of yours,' said the Brahman, 'who and what was he?'

The Jain gave an embarrassed cough. 'You speak of Chalanka, who was but yesterday amongst us and now has passed away? He, too, is worthy of our worship; he had overcome the eight great crimes, fasting in silence (even

as did the blessed Mahâvîr, who for months kept his eyes fixed upon the tip of his nose); he had vanquished all human passion and infirmity, and now therefore that he has crossed the ocean of existence, his life remains to us for an example.'

The Brahman made a guttural sound of intense contempt. 'An example truly!' he exclaimed; and then coming nearer and lowering his voice as he bent his cold keen eyes upon the other's face, he asked, 'Know you how he died—and why? Hear then!'

It was a wild story that was poured into the Jain's unwilling ears, a story of stolen joys, of detection, hideous punishment and fierce despair; it was small wonder that Acharya Chick utterly refused to believe it.

'Where is this perjured dancing girl of yours?' he said. 'I would fain question her.'

'The girl?' said the Brahman drily. 'Where not you, Acharya Chick, nor any man will see her more. And this man, forsooth, is to take his place amongst your divinities—his shrine is to be decked whilst the idol of sacred Siva craves garlands in vain! Nay, this shall not be. I, his unworthy priest, protest against this last outrage. Let this image depart, which you know not how to honour—let it depart, I say!'

Mild as the Jain was, he was not going to be bullied in his own temple; the attack on Chalanka had roused his flagging enthusiasm; besides, the Brahman's demand was too unconscionable to be treated seriously.

'I have spoken, O Ram Chunga,' he said; 'leave me to administer my own temple and go in peace.'

'You refuse?' said Ram Chunga, and his brows grew black.

'I refuse!' said Acharya Chick.

'Then hear my warning. Not long can such obstinacy go unpunished. Our gods at least have not dreamed themselves to eternal apathy. They can reward, and, what is more, they can punish. Quick are they to feel a slight—yea, and to revenge it. Have you never heard of the bag of insufficient peas, and the insulted idol of Mahadeva, which is Iswara, which is Siva?'

And, as the Jain made no reply, Ram Chunga told him the story: how a pious but parsimonious worshipper repaired to the village of Tady Malingy, where are many temples to Mahadeva; how, being desirous to pay each shrine the compliment of an offering if he could do so with prudence, he solved the problem by procuring a bag of peas, a single one of which he laid before each idol. How, unhappily for him, there were not enough peas to go round, and one idol was left out in the cold, at which he was highly offended, and mortified into the bargain by the insolent boasting of the other gods, who seem, by the way, to have been somewhat easily elated. How, in his anger, the incensed idol transported itself miraculously across the river in chase of the unsuspecting worshipper, who was trudging home in calm satisfaction with his own economical genius. And how something too dreadful to describe befell the pilgrim, and how the idol evermore refused to return, and all its former companions and their temples lie fathoms deep under the sand to this day.

This marvellous tale Ram Chunga repeated with impressive solemnity. 'Such is Siva, the glorious, the conqueror of death, in whose sacred name I now speak.' He concluded, 'Think once, aye and twice, ere you thwart him!'

Acharya Chick rose with a mild dignity. 'I must leave you, O Ram Chunga,' he said; 'it is the hour at which I begin my ministrations.'

The Brahman shrugged his shoulders. 'Upon your own head be the consequences,' he said. 'You are warned, and I say to you, Acharya Chick, that this image will yet be mine!'

He turned and strode down the path with his aquiline nose high in the air, while the Jain stood in the portico for a few moments, watching the Brahman's scarlet cap as it burned in the sun every time he passed out of the shade, before he went into his temple with a new reason for disquietude.

He could not, he would not, believe so terrible a slander, and yet he wished more than ever that the head guru had not been so positive about the new idol. He was more determined than before to observe a marked moderation in the offerings he laid before it.

Thus resolved, he shook off his slippers on the marble pavement of the vestibule under the central dome, and unfastened the heavy and richly inlaid doors which communicated with the idol-chamber, a large, cool, and dimly lighted place, where the air was charged with the accumulated fragrance of constantly renewed blossoms of the champak and a kind of oleander.

The whole of one wall was elaborately carved and divided into two tiers of highly ornamented niches. In the centre of the upper tier, supported by two other arhats, sat Mahâvîra, the presiding deity of the temple, whose image was painted yellow and bathed in a flood of mysterious glory from an unseen opening above, through which came the only light that was admitted.

In the lower tier were the other tirthankars, each idol painted its characteristic colour, and in a separate compartment; its sacred cognizance carved below, and the mystic triple umbrella forming a kind of finial over its head. The attitude was the same in every case: all the idols squatted cross-legged, their hands being laid, one on the other, over the feet, whose soles turned upwards; most of the images had been hung with earrings and necklaces of more or less value, and before each niche was a kind of slab or altar for the reception of offerings.

In the corner, by the doors, stood the image of Siva, which the Brahman coveted for his own temple; a large and imposing figure, pot-bellied, painted a sickly blue, with a superfluous eye in the middle of its forehead, and more arms than even a deity could manage with either comfort or dexterity.

It had not been found possible to accommodate Chalanka in the tier of niches, but they had contrived a very comfortable little recess and a temporary altar for him in the opposite wall. His image, it may be said, was in its general character of the same pattern as the rest, though—owing to a hint which Acharya had given the idol-carver—con-

siderably smaller; his cognizance was the hunting-leopard, or cheetah.

The gloom when the priest entered made it difficult to distinguish objects very clearly for a time, but, as his eyes became more accustomed to it, he made a startling discovery. Some impious person had entered during the night and stripped the idols of their jewellery! The robber had even dared to carry off the freshly dedicated flowers and fruit, for the altars which Acharya himself had seen heaped the night before were bared.

But the next moment brought a certain relief. It was not sacrilege after all; neither jewellery, fruit, nor flowers had been actually removed! The earrings and necklaces loaded the idol of the new tirthankar, before which the whole of the previous day's offerings were heaped in profusion.

The sight made Acharya extremely angry notwithstanding; the temple ministrant (for Acharya himself merely superintended the ceremonies) was youthful and fervid, but still it was ill-judged of him to give this invidious welcome to the idol of a local celebrity.

He sent for his too zealous subordinate and censured him severely; but unfortunately a vow of silence for that day prevented the offender from making any attempt at self-defence beyond shaking his head with much vehemence.

That evening, as Acharya presided over the distribution of the day's offerings, he was even more careful than before to restrict Chalanka's portion both in quantity and quality. It was vain to tell himself that the Brahman's

story had had no influence upon him—a slandered saint is like a damaged plum, something is gone from him that can never be restored—and then, too, the Jain had had his doubts from the beginning.

But the very next morning revealed an outrage of the grossest irreverence. Every one of the tirthankars had been turned upside-down in his niche, except Chalanka, who was almost hidden under a mass of flowers!

Acharya well knew that no Jain would be guilty of such impiety; he saw in it the hand of his unscrupulous adversary, Ram Chunga, and was struck with mingled consternation and wrath.

He got the idols replaced in a normal position before the worshippers arrived, and as soon as the morning's rites were ended he went down to the village and had an interview with the headman, Fattekhan Gûl, to whom he disclosed what had happened.

The headman sent him a Mussulman guard, who, having a splendid contempt for Jains and Brahmans alike, might be trusted to remain impartial, and who were posted around the temple in such a manner that none could approach unchallenged.

And then the idols were all carefully oiled and bathed with sandal water, and left for the night with a strong conviction on Acharya's part that their tranquillity was not likely to be again invaded.

But when he entered the idol-chamber at dawn next day it was to find it in a condition at the sight of which he staggered back confounded and appalled. All that had gone before was child's play to this. Every niche on the

lower tier was bare, and in the centre of the pavement was a pile of images, each one of which proved to have been mutilated—its nose, its ears (which were disproportionately large, and stuck out like the African elephant's), and the triple umbrella above its head had all been chipped off, and upon each altar a nose, an umbrella, and a pair of ears were laid out with derisive neatness!

Acharya almost lost his senses at the sight, for he had spent the whole night in watching, in going from post to post, and he knew that for this second outrage the Brahman could not by any possibility be responsible.

Yet a complete and valuable set of images had been ruthlessly defaced by someone, and the pious Jains would soon be at the gates to perform their morning's devotions. What would they think—what explanation could he give them?

To his more enlightened mind the images were but emblems; but this was a doctrine wholly beyond his flock, and he trembled to think of the view they might take of such a wholesale destruction.

The reader, who was quick of resources, proposed to restore the idols to their niches, and trust to the semi-darkness to conceal their imperfect condition, but Acharya was too dejected, and, be it added, too conscientious, to resort to any such evasion.

And so, when the earliest braziers and coppersmiths, after depositing their offerings in the porch, came into the idol-chamber, to walk round three times and make obeisances to the images as usual, they found their priest

standing with bent head and his white robes torn, behind a heap of mutilated divinities, and they stood aghast.

Gradually the chamber filled, and a buzz of dismayed curiosity rose from the various groups. If their gods were cast from their shrines, what was left for them to worship? and while some of the less devotionally-minded were rather relieved to have a legitimate excuse for non-attendance in future, the majority felt a pious regret for their gods—their bland, sleepy, smiling gods, who never gave any trouble, and whose faces had become as the faces of old friends.

'My children,' faltered the priest, perceiving they were waiting for some explanation, 'the destroyer has been at work in the darkness. I know no more than ye why this has come upon us, to humble me and perplex your hearts.'

'It is the evil spirits!' whispered Murli Dass, the coppersmith, and the congregation took it up and cried, 'Yes, it is the evil spirits—it is the *saktis*!' And they fell on their knees, and struck the floor with their foreheads; and Acharya, whatever his private opinions might be, did not contradict them now.

But there was a sudden stir in the crowd; several rose to their feet, and made way, as if for some personage of distinction, and Acharya, with an agony of mortification, saw his rival Ram Chunga approach—the very last person he wished to witness his embarrassment.

A village in any part of the world is not the place for a secret. The Jain's suspicions and request for a guard had not been long in reaching the Brahman's ears; he had come

up to repudiate the charge indignantly, when he gathered from the stir outside the temple that something extraordinary was going on within, and, with his habitual contempt for all prejudices but his own, strode in to discover what the matter might be for himself.

Ram Chunga, avoiding contact with the rest as much as possible, stood taking in the situation with no small bewilderment. 'What is this, O Acharya Chick?' he inquired at last.

'Behold,' said the Jain, 'the effigies of our blessed arhats have been found mutilated and dishonoured, as you see, and by whose hand we cannot tell!'

'Why,' the Brahman asked himself, 'had this wretched old creature destroyed the gods by which he lived? for of course this was his work.' Ram Chunga was not above conducting a manifestation or arranging miracles himself, but he did not understand a portent on such a scale as this; it seemed wanting in common judgment.

And then suddenly he saw through the design: this Jain priest in his mulish obstinacy had actually destroyed his Siva rather than deliver it to his rival, and then, to divert suspicion, had been forced to deface his own images.

'Where is the image of Siva the undying?' he demanded with a black frown. 'Bring it forth that I may look upon it.'

'It is there, behind you,' said the Jain dejectedly, and Ram Chunga, turning, beheld for the first time the idol on which he had grounded so pretty a quarrel. Till then he had had no particular desire to possess it for its own

sake; now the sight of it strengthened his determination to get it out of alien hands.

It really was a handsome idol, rather antiquated perhaps in design, but still of excellent workmanship and, notwithstanding its somewhat questionable origin, orthodox in all its details; it would do credit to the best-appointed temple.

And, to his intense surprise, he found it absolutely uninjured. Evidently this old fool had not had the nerve, when it came to the point, to deface it, and render it useless (a mutilated Hindu idol being, of course, about as formidable as a spiked gun).

What could have made him attempt such a piece of reckless folly? Was it—and the Brahman's brows grew darker at the idea—was it intended to throw suspicion on *him*? If that were so, he should find he had made a slight miscalculation.

He turned upon the Jains with a magnificent gesture. 'Hear me, O Acharya Chick,' he said, 'and answer truly. Did not I but two days since make demand of you for the restoration of this image of the god from which you and your followers have turned away? Did I not warn you of the indignity you did him in introducing a miserable *yogi*, who but yesterday was in our streets, to be his fellow-god and companion in your idol-chamber?'

'Even so, Ram Chunga,' said the Jain, 'nor will I now deny it.'

'Behold the warning fulfilled!' the Brahman cried. 'Siva, the beautiful, the blue-necked, has spoken; he has shattered the gods whom he has suffered so long!'

The Jains were deeply impressed by this; less enlightened than their teacher, their idols were for them concrete divinities who could hear their humble prayers and satisfy their moderate wants. They had always felt a secret conviction that it was not quite respectful to ignore Siva so pointedly, and now this neglected Siva had suddenly developed into a tremendous deity, who could manifest his displeasure in a very practical manner.

But Acharya's suspicions of the Brahman rose again at this attempt to turn the situation to his own advantage; he was resolved to dispose of these outrageous pretensions if he could. 'What sign have you, O Ram Chunga, that it is as you have said?' he inquired.

'A sign?' said the Brahman. 'Is not the image of Siva unharmed? Are not yours defaced and discredited? And you ask for a sign!'

Acharya, in glancing round the idol-chamber, had already observed a fact which he did not at first mention, for it only perplexed him more, but now he turned it to account with desperate readiness.

'Siva has wrought it, because his image has gone unharmed!' he exclaimed. 'How then has he spared the very image which you assert to be the main cause of his wrath? If Siva is untouched, much more then is the image of Chalanka, for look you to what honour has he been exalted!'

He pointed as he spoke to the centre niche in the topmost tier, the niche lately occupied by the portly idol of Mahâvîra. There, looking ludicrously disproportioned to its cell, squatted the newest and smallest tirthankar,

basking with a smile of subdued and private enjoyment in the flood of mysterious glory which had so lately belonged to the deposed Mahâvîra!

The congregation, who had not noticed this before, saw it now with a cry of rapture—surely Chalanka, who had weathered a storm in which so many deities of, so to speak, far higher tonnage had foundered, surely he must be a god of sound and solid qualities, a god who could hold his own with the whole Hindu mythology!

The Brahman sneered. So *this*, after all, was what the Jain had been scheming for! He had sacrificed the greater part of his sacred stock to increase the value of the remainder—well, he would checkmate him there at all events! 'Does a tiger lie in wait for a rat?' he said, 'or shall an elephant charge a tortoise? Fools, all of ye, and blind, not to see that this Chalanka of yours owes his immunity to his insignificance! These others are in a measure divinities, but he is less than all, and therefore the mighty magnanimous Siva scorns to lift up so much as the little finger of his sixth hand in wrath against him. He hath set him thus on high in his derision, as the god before whom it is indeed fit that such as ye should bow!'

The Jains veered round again. Ram Chunga was wise and spoke with assurance; he must know best.

'Set up your maimed idols,' the Brahman continued, with biting scorn, 'worship them as before, for what concern is it of mine or Siva's? But detain his image no longer, yield it to me, his servant. For the last time I demand it!'

'Ram Chunga,' said the Jain, mildly but with determination, 'since first it was removed hither, yonder idol has refrained from all disturbance, nor has it given the least sign of displeasure. I will not believe that these dread signs proceed from it now, nor will I ever consent to dishonour the chamber which is concentrated to the arhats by robbing it of such an embellishment. Never will I——' But here, with a groan of horror, he covered his eye with his hand, and rushed into the vestibule followed by his anxious flock.

'A fly in it, my children!' he gasped; 'in the name of the blessed arhats and the pure existences, take it out ere it die!'

A European's chief solicitude under the circumstances would scarcely be lavished on the fly; but the stricter Jains are most averse to the destruction of any form of life, and take every imaginable precaution—even to wearing cloth respirators—against the involuntary swallowing of the minuter insects.

So for some moments of intense excitement the priest's eye was surrounded by an eager group, all anxious to save the fly if possible; Murli Dass, the oilman, got it out with a strip of linen from his loin-cloth, but unhappily the fly had ceased to live—in fact, it was hardly to be recognised as a fly at all, for the priest, in the first agony of smarting, had so far forgotten himself as to rub his eye with fatal violence.

When Acharya Chick realised this, he sank down heavily, quite overcome by the blow, upon the nearest stone bench, amidst cries of fresh consternation from his

people. He never sat down anywhere as a general rule without having first carefully dusted his proposed seat with a small feather brush, not because he was afraid of sullying his robe, but from the aforesaid unwillingness of all Jains to destroy even the lowest forms of life.

In his agitation he omitted to use his brush on this occasion; a large red spider had dropped upon the bench but one instant before, and the most humane person cannot sit upon a spider without putting it to the gravest inconvenience.

The Jain prostrated himself in unavailing penitence before its flattened form, cast dust upon his shaven head, and vowed to accomplish various uncomfortable penances —but the spider would never spin a web again!

His congregation edged away from him with horror-stricken haste; of course similar mishaps had occurred to them all now and then, but for a priest to transgress twice in such close succession seemed to show that he was pursued by some evil destiny.

Ram Chunga, whose tenets did not go to quite such lengths, had been a spectator of the scene, which, as usual, he sought to adapt to his own ends.

'Are you still obdurate?' he said, 'or do you recognise in this the hand of Siva?'

The Jains might have resisted the evidence of the fly, but, corroborated by the spider, it was irresistible; they fell on their faces: 'Siva, Lord Siva, have pity upon us!' they cried. Had Ram Chunga cared to proselytize, he could have carried them all over to his own sect there and then; but their belief was a matter of total indif-

ference to him: these brass-workers were too poor to be profitable.

'And you, Acharya Chick,' he said, 'you will yield the image?'

The Jain was about to refuse once more, but his followers would not hear of it. 'Yield it,' they cried, 'oh, yield it, lest harm overtake us also!'

And Archarya Chick knew that his hold over them was rudely shaken, if not lost for ever. Sullenly he turned to the Brahman and said, 'Take it, and trouble us no more!'

Thus had Ram Chunga triumphed, winning a twofold victory; he had acquired a most desirable addition to his temple, an idol which would have all the interest of a trophy, and probably tell favourably for months upon the temple receipts, and, which pleased him better still, he had thoroughly crushed the rival whose temple had always been an eyesore to him—the Jain was worsted, humbled, struck by his own cobra.

The Brahman was not precisely the man to spare a defeated adversary a single pang. It was good policy to make as much of his advantage as possible, and, besides, it was clearly impossible to walk out with the surrendered idol under his arm.

'This submission is tardy, but prudent,' he said, 'and I accept it in the mighty name of Siva, conqueror of death. With glory and rejoicing shall the sacred image of Iswara be conducted to a more seemly abode. At the hour of sunset the idol of ever-living Brahma shall come himself to escort him. See that your gates are open to us when we

arrive, and should any unseemly encounter take place between our respective followers, I shall hold you responsible.'

Acharya Chick bent his head in silent resignation; he felt a sullen impatience to have the measure of his humiliation filled to the brim; the mainspring of his simple inoffensive life was snapped, the good he had tried to do all undone, and he felt a bitter protest against the apathy which could allow such things to be.

He stood in the vestibule for some time after the Brahman had gone, gazing blankly on the marble flags; the reader and the officiating priest were afraid to ask if the morning services were to take place as usual, and stood apart. Acharya had not courage to order the idols to be replaced, and the usual invocations and lustral ceremonies to be gone through as if nothing had happened; the Jains had all gone back to their daily labours, and it was doubtful whether they would ever consent to do homage again to the noseless idols whom they had seen piled up in an ignominious heap on the floor of the sanctuary.

At last he came out of his reverie with a groan, and fled like a hunted man from his dishonoured temple, and up the rocky heights, till the noonday blaze forced him to fall panting in the shade of a projecting crag; and the temple attendants went their own ways, and the temple itself was deserted.

The Brahman meanwhile had gone down to the village, bent upon organising as magnificent a display as could be procured on such short notice. He was excessively pleased

at having so completely outwitted the hypocritical and cowardly old Jain, and he arranged in his mind where the new idol should be set up; it only needed a little purification, a few *mantrams*, to be as good as ever.

And before the day declined the whole Hindu portion of the villagers, thanks to the Brahman's endeavours, was in a ferment of religious excitement. Acharya had spent the greater part of the day crouched in such shade as he could find, his mind possessed by a kind of stupor, his main impulse the childish determination to mortify himself to the utmost. But as the sun began to set, and the plain below steamed with the mists from the paddy fields, he grew more collected; some powerful attraction seemed to be drawing him down the slope to where his temple stood; he was impelled to be present at his own humiliation.

So, feeling faint and weak, he clambered painfully down until he reached a banyan grove, from which he could command his own compound, and see all that took place without attracting observation.

Very soon the air thickened with sudden dusk, and part of the village became outlined in flickering lines of fire, while a confused buzzing began to be heard in the direction of the bazaar.

The buzzing grew louder, swelling into a low roar, above which rose the clash of cymbals and the screaming of chank shells; with a little stretching the Jain could make out a dim confused mass swarming up the slope, and knew that the procession had already started to conduct Siva to his new home.

Up they came, with clouds of dust, and waving banners and sacred insignia, with leaping fanatics, and slow serpentine movements of the nautch girls at the head, and in the midst, drawn by bullocks, came the huge clumsy idol-chariot, with its barbaric splendour of carving and gilding, its dome-shaped canopy, which caught the last red ray of the sun.

And now the crowd had surged through the temple gates, and there was Ram Chunga with other white-robed Brahmans, keeping what order was possible in the wild throng.

And then, the road being clear for it, the idol-car rolled, creaking and jolting over the threshold, whilst the idol it bore wobbled, with some loss of dignity, upon the lofty seat to which it had very prudently been strapped.

It was a representation of Brahma in one of his numerous *avatars*, the god being fashioned as a man-lion, with the usual superabundance of arms, one pair of which seemed busy plucking a small figure which lay across his knees and was supposed to be a personal enemy.

This was a very exclusive idol, and a visit from it was esteemed as an overwhelming distinction throughout Mysore; in fact, it only went out once a year to confer with an extremely well-connected idol of Vishnu at a *mandapam*, or sacred rest-house, half-way from their respective temples, but on this occasion Ram Chunga's influence had enabled the rule to be relaxed in Siva's favour.

Here it was accordingly, and a rich pavilion was put

up at one end of the compound, within which the distinguished visitor was installed, and, this done, the Brahmans entered the temple and came out bearing the wonder-working image of Siva, which was hailed with acclamations, while it was being reverently deposited in the pavilion by the side of Brahma.

And then, as the gods would necessarily have many things to say to one another, the hangings were drawn, and the priests made a ring round the pavilion, and stood guarding it from vulgar curiosity.

While the conference was supposed to be taking place within, Ram Chunga mounted the footboard of the chariot and addressed the crowd. He rapidly sketched the history of this image of Siva, that had been preserved originally for the lingering homage of heretic Jains, then gradually ignored and degraded to the level of an ornament, till the last indignity was attained in the introduction of Chalanka. The Brahman gave a highly-coloured description of the various marvels by which the offended god had vindicated his majesty, and finally worked up his hearers to a frenzy of wrath against the Jains, which he calmed down to the best of his ability by telling them that their misguided fellow-villagers had acted thus under pure ignorance, having merely followed the leading of their spiritual guide, his worthy, if somewhat self-sufficient brother, Acharya Chick.

There were shouts and yells for Chick, demands that he should be dragged from his shrine, hurled over the rock, and so on, which made the Jain priest grateful to his sheltering banyans, and those of his congregation

whom curiosity had driven to follow the procession, sorry that they had not stayed at home.

But now the gods had had sufficient time to exchange views, and it was time to gratify them with the ministrations of the dancing girls, before the united idols were placed upon the chariot and carried home together in pomp.

So the tom-toms were rattled and thumped with fervour, and the torches made the compound light as day, as the dancing girls, in robes of purple and orange and green, edged with glittering silver tissue, prepared to go through their dreamy and deliberate evolutions, accompanied by chants like the cry of the midnight cat, and Ram Chunga gave the signal for the hangings to be drawn back.

A universal shriek marked their withdrawal, as the torchlight shed its fierce glare upon the interior. Ram Chunga grew green, and his teeth chattered, as well they might, and even Acharya Chick, as he gazed from afar, could hardly trust his eyesight. For the sacred idol of Brahma was broken into a dozen pieces, his arms were planted, with considerable taste and fancy, in various corners of the floor; and, worse still, the hardly-won idol of Siva was in the same plight, its fragments arranged in a pyramid upon the principal throne, upon the very summit of which squatted, with a bland smile on its smug features, the despised image of Chalanka, the least and lowest of the Jain tirthankars!

For once Ram Chunga's presence of mind deserted him. He could not lay the blame upon the Jains because of the Brahman *cordon* around the pavilion; it did occur

to him to explain so disastrous an occurrence by the legend of some ancient feud between Brahma and Siva, which had prompted their images to fly at one another like fighting cocks, but that would be an admission of want of tact on his own part in throwing them together, and, even then, the interference of this despicable little Jain idol remained unaccounted for!

So the haughty Ram Chunga, savagely accepting his defeat, wrapped his shawl about him, and made his way, through the shivering dancing girls and awestruck villagers, out of the precincts of the temple where he had been so signally discomfited.

There was no desire on the part of the others to remain in that accursed place any longer; their idols were useless, and they left the gaudy wreckage where it was, and filed out of the compound thoroughly cowed and abashed. And as they descended a sudden squall swept from the heights behind them, and the rain came down in gleaming lances, and, drenched and miserable, the procession fled back to the temple they had quitted so triumphantly, as if pursued to its gates by the anger of Chalanka.

The Jains, realising that their 'ugly duckling' of an idol had proved more than a match for the two chief personages of the Hindu mythology, now ventured boldly forth, and carried Chalanka's image with rejoicing into the idol-chamber, where they were joined by Acharya Chick.

'Henceforth,' cried Murli Dass triumphantly, 'our reverence is due to Chalanka alone; he has delivered us —he has shown himself mightier than the gods of old,

mightier than the blessed tirthankars! Tell us, O Father, is it not so?'

Acharya Chick looked at the idol with an uncontrollable feeling of repulsion. 'It is even so,' he said, 'and may he prove himself as benevolent as he is mighty!'

* * * * * *

From that hour the fame of Chalanka was established, and spreading further with every day. The other tirthankars were entirely discarded by the Jains of the locality, who transferred their entire homage to the last translated saint.

A splendid shrine was erected to him, which pilgrims came from Girnar, from Patna, and even from Mount Abu, to worship.

At this shrine Acharya officiated for a time, but after a very brief period retired from the priesthood altogether, and no one ever made out exactly why, though there were rumours that the idol had manifested a pointed dislike to his services; he was succeeded by a Jain *yati* who gave perfect satisfaction, and marvels and signs, of a somewhat *ad captandum* order, were of almost daily occurrence at the altar of Chalanka.

It soon became clear that the idol was of an exceptionally jealous disposition, keeping his devotees well up to the mark in the matter of offerings, and altogether religious enthusiasm was maintained at a wonderfully high level, compared with the attendances and ceremonies which had satisfied the easy-going original tirthankars,

which, perhaps, shows that your upstart idol is not different from other mushrooms.

Thus, for some years, shrine and idol flourished, and the village found spiritual and commercial benefit from the circumstance, until the bad times came when Tippoo Sahib took it into his ill-regulated head to force the Mussulman faith indiscriminately upon all his subjects.

Temples of various denominations were wantonly destroyed, and the idols buried by their custodians until brighter days should dawn; and possibly some such fate as this befell the shrine of Chalanka, for no record of it is to be found later than the fall of Seringapatam and the annexation of Mysore by Great Britain.

But the legend survives to this day, and, as will be seen hereafter, an attempt has even been made on the part of a highly cultivated Babu to connect it with certain events which form the European part of this story.

How far this attempt may be justified, this historian presumes not to decide, but he submits the tradition here for what it may be worth, on the bare chance that it may be accepted as shedding some faint light upon much that is otherwise inexplicable.

THE STORY.

SCENE, *London*, TIME, *Nineteenth Century*.

CHAPTER I.

SELF-RESTRAINT.

I love not less though less the show appear,
That love is merchandised whose rich esteeming
The owner's tongue doth publish everywhere.

THERE are parts of London which never seem to have been thoroughly assimilated. Anyone who is at all familiar with the metropolis will be able to recall at least one neighbourhood of this kind. The houses are small and neat, in the doll's-house style of architecture, with a tendency to over-indulgence in green blinds and burnished brass, and street-numbering is almost abandoned in favour of names charged with rural or sentimental associations. Its thoroughfares are free from bustle and noise, its shops maintain a calm and serious front, while its principal wheel traffic consists of the tricycle, the milk cart, and the piano organ. Entering such a region as this, one cannot but be struck by the contrast between the turmoil

that has only just ceased to be audible, and this peacefulness which, if not precisely arcadian, is distinctly provincial, producing, as it does, a general impression of a Sunday afternoon at a second-rate inland watering-place, between the seasons.

It may possibly excite the smile of superiority when it is added that these characteristics may all be found in a district which, in fiction and drama, is reserved exclusively for scenes of Bohemianism and guilty splendour —the much maligned district of St. John's Wood, but it is the fact nevertheless, and as many of the scenes of this story have to be laid in that suburb, it seems not wholly impertinent to insist upon it at starting

In one of the quietest and most unimpeachable roads in the neighbourhood in question, there is a little two-storied house, or rather cottage, with an acacia in front and at the back a long out-building whose big north-light proclaims its use.

It was in fact, at the time of which I am writing, the studio of a young painter who was already beginning to be known in Art circles, and who was at work there on the particular afternoon in early spring with which this narrative opens.

It was not one of the picturesque studios; it would have made a poor show in an illustrated article, for it boasted no carved gallery, no stained glass, nor rich tapestry, none of the splendours in short of the man to whom success has brought luxury, or who expects his luxury to bring him success. Ronald Campion was too fond of somewhat daring experiments to have quite gained

the confidence of the British art-patron, and, so far, such praise as had been accorded him was greatly in excess of the solid pudding.

He was too engrossed in his work to care, even if he could afford it, to surround himself with disturbing influences; the rooms in which he lived were as harmonious and artistic as his means could make them, but in his studio reigned a severity which many of his sitters felt as a personal affront.

It was big and bare, and a cold dry light pervaded it, piled canvases, dusty casts, and dingy studies leaned or hung against the walls; on the tables lay heaps of colour-tubes and brushes in stained newspaper; here and there was a glowing piece of embroidery, or a quaintly carved chair, but these were strictly for use not show; it was easy to infer from the surroundings that their owner was a painter in grim earnest.

The conviction would only have been confirmed by Campion's appearance as he stood at the large and ambitious-looking canvas before him: a tall well-built man with fair hair which came in a crisp wave over his forehead, light blue eyes, with a trained keenness in their gaze, a blunt nose and a short golden beard and moustache which did not wholly conceal the rather sceptical and ironical mouth.

He was not strictly a handsome man, though his face had a power and attractiveness of its own, and his figure would have appeared to advantage in one of the becoming painting-suits in which many less well favoured men indulge, but while he was not of the order of squalid

geniuses, there were no more traces of an eye to effect in his dress than in his studio.

Such was Ronald Campion, as he stood painting with a rapid bold action, and an air of entire absorption in his work, from which he only paused to give some slightly impatient direction to the model who stood and shivered in classical costume on his right, for it was cold work keeping the pose when the stove had been allowed to go out for lack of attention.

So much engrossed was he, that he did not look round when the door which communicated with the house opened, and an elderly man with a cross-grained walnut-coloured face made his appearance. 'Mister Babcock to see you, sir,' he announced with a certain grim relish, as he stood at the top of the short flight of steps.

Campion muttered something which did not sound like delight. 'Hang it, Bales, couldn't you tell him I was busy,' he said.

'Just precisely what I did tell him,' said Bales, with an injured air; 'but it wasn't no use; he's a-comin' in, he is—wants to see you on important business, 'cordin' to him.'

Bales was an old soldier who had been a professional model for some years, and now acted as Campion's factotum. His chief characteristic was a systematic disbelief in everything and everybody, which he seldom lost a chance of expressing.

As he spoke he stood aside to make way for the visitor, who seemed to have no misgivings as to his welcome. 'Well, my dear fellow, how are you? Hard

at it, as usual, I see. Never saw such a fellow,' he began, in the tone of one who rallies another upon a rather ridiculous foible. 'I thought I'd drop in and look you up—can't stop long. I wanted to see you about a little matter of mine.'

And he glanced at the model with a meaning which Campion affected not to understand, for he continued to paint. 'Well, he said, 'you won't mind my going on? I can listen and work too.'

'Oh, I'll wait till we're alone. I'm not in such a hurry as all that. I can take a look round till you're ready,' said Babcock cheerfully. 'What have you been doing for the shows this year, eh? I shan't send anything in this season, after the way they've treated me; but you always manage to get the right side of 'em somehow.'

Babcock was a painter himself, so far as he could be said to have a profession at all. He had always had a taste for sketching, and an eye for colour; and, as he had a handsome private income, he was well able to devote some of it to supporting himself by the exercise of his art.

He had drifted from one art school to another until he conceived his education complete, and then he set up an elaborately appointed studio, where he soon became celebrated for his afternoon tea, and was reported to have begun several important pictures.

Babcock was inclined to be severe upon contemporary art, and had a reputation for extreme fastidiousness, which he seldom perilled by unstinted praise. So he

strolled from canvas to canvas in Campion's studio with an air of calm superiority which was intensely trying.

'What's this—young woman taking a header? Ha! I see, very good—"Burning Sappho"—putting herself out. And that's for the Academy? Um. Think you've got that forearm in drawing? doesn't look quite right to me. And you might have caught more of the Greek feeling, perhaps.'

Campion, after some fruitless attempts to go on with his work, had sent his model away, and sat down chafing, as Babcock came round and inspected his latest and largest canvas through his *pince-nez*.

'More classics, eh? What are you going to call this—Scene from the Trojan War?'

'You're only a few centuries out,' said Campion. 'It's Xerxes on Mount Ægaleus watching the battle of Salamis.'

'Ah, to be sure; good subject—capital *subject*. Not new though, is it? And, to be frank, it's not quite what I should call happy.'

'No more was Xerxes at that particular moment,' said Campion.

'You don't see what I mean: it's all too modern—a trifle *voulu*; wants what you may call the repose, the—the remoteness of really great Art.' And Babcock made that little wave of the hand which is so useful as a definition. 'It's the same everywhere, nowadays. A man paints two or three models in fancy dress, and thinks he has re-created the Past—it's a mistake, sir. There are very few men whose art is capable of going back beyond a couple of centuries.'

'I've seen some things of yours that had gone back a good part of the way, Babcock.'

'Mine! why, I don't attempt historical subject myself. I'm not a figure-painter, unfortunately.'

'I don't see anything unfortunate about it—it might be worse.'

'Yes, that's true; there's a good deal to be done in landscape. Still, now and then, I confess I rather wish—which brings me to what I came about. The fact is, I've just finished a landscape study—a glade in Epping Forest. I rather pleased myself over it.'

'Congratulate you, I'm sure,' growled Campion.

'Thanks; but, with all that, it wants something.'

'Purchaser?'

'That, my dear fellow, depends upon you,' was the answer.

'Very sorry, but I have to deny myself luxuries,' said Campion.

'Oh, ah; I didn't expect you to buy it. It's this way, don't you see. I got Sieditoff of Bond Street to come round and look at it, and he said he'd take it for that gallery of his, and do his best to find a purchaser, only I must put a figure in the foreground first. Now, I don't pretend to be a figure-painter.'

'But why not?'

'Well, 'pon my word, I can't say; I never took it up, somehow. But you, now. Well, that's certainly your strong point—I always admit that. And so it struck me that you wouldn't mind putting me in some kind of a figure—I don't care what. You will, won't you?'

'I don't know, Babcock,' said Campion. 'Suppose I can't catch the Epping Forest feeling?'

'Nonsense, you can do it if you like; and of course, I'll take care your name comes in.'

'Thanks, but I couldn't think of that,' said Campion, in some alarm. 'I'll paint your figure for you, though, whenever you like. I suppose there's no particular hurry.'

'Well, I should like it soon. I'll bring the thing round to-morrow. And now that's settled. I didn't come in to interrupt you, so I'll be off. What, another picture? —portrait this time. I must have a look at this before I go.'

He had come upon a large easel and canvas which had been rolled into a corner, and which he now wheeled out to the light. 'I thought I recognised her,' he cried. 'Miss Elsworth, by Jove—little Sybil!'

'It is Miss Elsworth,' said Campion rather coldly. 'What of it?'

It was the portrait of a girl who had thrown herself lazily back in a deep chair, her hands lying lightly folded in her lap. She had a charming audacious face, the eyes, wide apart and of a limpid grey, were set at an inclination just Oriental enough to be piquant, and gleamed with a certain playful malice, as the full red lips curved into a little smile of disdainful submission.

She was painted in pure white with a knot of blue at her shoulder, and behind her were heavily embroidered Japanese hangings, overlaid with strangely coloured birds and beasts and coils of glittering gold, all woven together in one rich harmony, and, dangerous as such a background

was, it was both faithfully rendered and skilfully subordinated, whilst the portrait, as a whole, was a successful piece of daring which impressed even Lionel Babcock.

'I should screw up that white another tone or two if it was mine,' was the only comment he made, however, as he inspected it through his finger and thumb in the orthodox manner.

'And so she's actually been sitting to you all this time?' he added, and his somewhat prominent eyes protruded rather more.

'She actually has. It does seem an eccentric thing to do, but she did it.'

'What astonishes me is that Sybil should never have breathed a word about it to me—we've always been such particular chums that it is odd—she always carries all her little troubles to me.'

'Perhaps this was too big to carry,' said Campion.

'Ah!'—and Babcock turned this suggestion over without appearing to make much of it—'I dare say. Well, I expect it didn't occur to her to mention it. I must say, my boy, you've succeeded admirably in catching the mere likeness—but I miss her expression, sort of eager interested look she has, if you ever noticed it.'

'She would reserve that for a chum.'

'Well, she's a queer girl, but she can be delightful when she chooses, I do assure you. Now, how did you find her?'

'Perfectly civil, thank you, Babcock.'

'Oh, my dear fellow, she'd be civil, of course, civil. But you've no idea how different she can be with a man

who understands how to treat her—why, when she's been talking to me——'

'How do you manage to be so sympathetic?'

'I—I don't manage, my dear fellow. Somehow, I don't know why, I'm a kind of father confessor to lots of girls, give 'em good advice, don't you know, and form their taste for 'em. Women are like other domestic animals—always know the fellows who are used to 'em and understand 'em. Now I've made rather a study of them myself, you know; I flatter myself I read 'em like books.'

'Thought you only read the reviews?' said Campion.

'Read the book too, if it's worth reading; it generally isn't. But about this portrait, of course I've often seen you at her aunt's, I suppose she gave you the commission; queer old lady, isn't she? Goes in for amateur benevolence, hat always going round for some genius who'll astonish the world for a few more coppers; that house of hers in Sussex Place is a sort of patent incubator for hatching swans, only she will fill her ovens with duck's eggs—funny, isn't it?'

'Well,' said Campion, 'you see I was one of the ducklings myself.'

'Oh, ah, so you were,' said Babcock, perfectly unabashed, 'but we'll hope you'll turn out more in the ugly duckling line. I remember, you were tied down in some Bank or other, and she got you out of it—that was how we came to meet, where was it? At the Slade, first, I think. And then you got into the Academy—and I didn't—but went that sporting and sketching tour to India instead. That reminds me, I pleased our dear Mrs. Staniland

immensely the other day, brought a chela to see her I had met out at Bombay when I was over there. You know what a chela is? sort of budding Buddhist, sucking Mahatma. Calls himself Axel Nebelsen, Norwegian or Swede or something, I fancy. Went out to India on some scientific expedition, and turned Theosophist. Now he's over here, dining out and advertising the religion. It hasn't been started long but it's pushing its way, don't you know. And the women run after him a good deal, queer-looking chap, talks till all's blue—ever meet him?'

'Never,' said Campion, 'what does he do?'

'Mild miracles—sort of parlour prophet, don't you know. Goes out to dinner and pecks a little rice all the time, and then has a trance upstairs over his tea-cup. Says he sees everybody with an *aura* about him, so have I—after dinner. And he's learning to manage his astral body, but he daren't let it outside the door yet. I think he's a bit of a humbug myself, but he amuses me. He's always holding forth to me on the advantages of being a Buddhist. But, as I tell him, I don't see the good of it—even supposing you pass as a Mahatma, and poor old Nebelsen says it's devilish stiff, and thinks he's a safe plough, you only learn a lot of secrets you mayn't turn to any account. And what's the end of it all? Being "absorbed into Buddha"—which, as far as I can make out, won't make any difference to old Buddha, and would be the end of *me*. I call it foolishness. Not that Nebelsen hasn't powers of some kind. I've seen that fellow do things with cigarettes that were quite astounding in their way, and he produced a succession of raps out of old Lady

Timberlake's head the other evening, that I wouldn't have believed unless I'd heard 'em. As for bell sounds, when he's in form he'll tinkle all with 'em, and they say he actually materialised a strawberry the other day when they were about half-a-crown apiece. Only where's the sense of materialising *one* strawberry? These chaps ain't practical.'

So Babcock rattled on, not much caring whether he was listened to or not, until he ran down, and Campion hoped he was going in earnest.

But he was standing before the portrait again. 'I say, Campion,' he began once more, 'did Miss Elsworth while she was sitting for this know you knew *me*?'

'Not that I am aware of—why?'

'Well, you just try mentioning my name, and see if you don't catch a different expression. She looks to me, in the picture you know, just the least bit bored, eh? as if you hadn't tried to interest her.'

'You think so?' said Campion, 'it's very possible!'

'Well, you can't expect to do justice to a girl like that if you paint her in cold blood.'

'My dear fellow, I didn't — I prefer the ordinary medium.'

'You know what I mean. Here you are sitting down to interpret all the sentiment, the poetry, the—the fresh indescribable charm and grace of a delightful girl, for, take my word for it, she *is* that if you only knew her—you sit down and paint all that with as little emotion, as little care to catch the highest power of your subject as if you were painting a pump!'

'How do you know what I feel when I paint a pump, Babcock? As to the portrait here, that's a matter of opinion of course; if I've failed—I've failed!'

'Oh, I don't say that. It's a clever thing. But the fact is, only a lover could seize the soul in her face, don't you know.'

'I daresay, which would account for my not taking that liberty!'

'I wish *I* was a portrait painter. Gad, I've a good mind to ask her for sittings as it is!' cried Babcock, 'I don't mind telling you, old fellow, but for the last twelvemonths I've been gradually getting deeper in love with that little girl. I'm over head and ears now.'

'That is deep,' said Campion, drily.

'I'm no stoic to go on seeing her week after week without a heartbeat. I'd propose to-morrow, only there's no particular hurry—she's young, and I'm not quite tired of bachelor life yet. I shall give myself another year of it.'

Campion looked at him; he was not distinguished or impressive looking. He was short, with dark hair parted in the middle, a pale, rather flabby face, a loose mouth; he had done nothing so far except talk, and was never likely to do more; but for all that, Lionel Babcock was a personage in his way; if he bored most men, women found him both instructive and amusing; he was fluent and self-assured; he was particularly well off.

Would anyone say he had not a good chance of winning a young girl's heart? and yet, to hear him calmly assume that this was so, grated on Campion's nerves.

'Yes,' continued Babcock, 'I've got the old lady on my side. She's naturally anxious to protect the poor child from any imprudent engagement, and so I may very well wait. And she's so young, scarcely developed as yet, a little crude—even *bornée* still; she wants more atmosphere, more perspective, don't you know!'

'Yes, and the violet wants sprinkling with a little sachet-powder, and the Lodore Falls want lighting up with red fire, and you're the man to do it all, my dear Babcock!'

'But she does want manner, you know; you mayn't notice it, but it's a fact. Why, this very morning, I came across them in a bric-à-brac shop in Hanway Street, and when she saw me she——'

'Haven't we discussed Miss Elsworth about enough?' asked Campion.

'I can see you've taken a strong prejudice against the poor girl, Campion. Well, I won't talk about her then, and I really must bolt now, I've got an appointment at home. I'll bring the landscape round some time to-morrow, then!'

When he had really gone Campion broke into a laugh, which was rather savage than amused. Then he went to the portrait and studied it: 'Was that ass right?' he was thinking; 'does that look on her face mean—boredom? Isn't there a touch of something like sufferance on her lips? It didn't strike me so while I was painting her, and yet—and yet—confound Babcock!'

He wheeled the big easel back into the corner again, and, returning to his classical picture, touched in some

details from the studies he had made for them, but, after a while, he stopped with an impatient sigh. 'No good,' he muttered, 'I may as well stop work for to-day—the light's getting bad, too. I'll go and get some calling over; no, I'm hanged if I do, I'll turn into the park.'

And presently he was crossing one of the canal bridges in the direction of the park. It was one of those spring afternoons when Nature seems to be collecting herself for the decisive movement. At first sight everything looked as bare and bleak as it had done for five dreary months past; only on closer view could it be discovered that the scumbled green of the steep banks was fresher and more vivid, that the branches against the sky were closely studded with tiny knobs, and the trunks touched with a light softer and more tender than that of a mere mid-winter afternoon.

Still the cheerfulness was mainly prophetic as yet; the roads were moist and gleaming, and, in the park, the paths which cut the slopes in various directions looked cold and chalky, against the dead green turf, and were soon lost in a misty veil; the sunset was represented by a salmon-coloured gash in the grey sky, the wind was in the north-east.

Campion had in the last year developed a strong affection for the Regent's Park, and in the absence of any distinct route, would turn in there instinctively, and his steps always led him in the same direction—towards the ornamental water by Sussex Place.

It is curious, the glamour which one perhaps all unconscious maiden can throw over an entire neighbour-

hood for him whom her charms have subdued. It can transform and beautify the least poetic surroundings, and has been known to outlast the original cause by many a year, so that a man may conceivably have to pause and ask his memory—it may be in vain—for whose sake it is that some very ordinary street or commonplace neighbourhood can thrill him yet with a vague romance as he passes through.

The divinity for whose sake a particular corner of the park possessed an irresistible attraction for Ronald Campion was, it may be needless to state, Miss Sybil Elsworth. He did not go there with any expectation, scarcely even the wish, of meeting her, and often as he took that direction he had only seen her on very rare occasions, either driving or walking, and always in the company of her aunt.

But he liked to walk there notwithstanding, and all the objects and even the people on that side had an interest and a picturesqueness, which were entirely wanting in any spot which did not happen to command a view of Sussex Place.

On this occasion, however, Campion longed for a more material solace; he was harassed by doubts and depression which nothing would chase away but the actual presence of the adored one.

And, as it happened, Fate was kind to him for this once; for while he was inside the radius of enchantment, he saw a dainty figure coming towards him from one of the bridges, and the figure was that of the enchantress.

As she came nearer there was the least little dimple

in her cheek; she recognised him evidently; she stopped and held out her hand, and even called him by his Christian name. Even that dull and unpleasant type of person, the 'most ordinary observer,' would have instantly suspected, from the manner of both, that they were on terms of some intimacy; and so they were, for they were engaged.

CHAPTER II.

A REMONSTRANCE.

There's a present for you, sir! Yes, thanks to her thrift,
My pet has been able to buy me a gift.—*London Lyrics.*

RONALD CAMPION had indeed succeeded in winning Mrs. Staniland's niece Sybil, but the elder lady had not as yet been consulted, and it was by no means likely that the engagement would meet with her approval. It is true that Ronald was a *protégé* of hers: she had rescued him from his uncongenial duties as a bank clerk, and enabled him to follow the art he loved; and now that he was beginning to be known as a painter of decided promise she could reflect with some complacency that she had discovered him. But the discoverer of a new country does not invariably feel called upon to live in it, and Mrs. Staniland had always maintained a certain social distance in her relations with the various objects of her benevolence.

Campion received occasional invitations of an informal kind, but he had never been admitted to any real intimacy; and when Sybil Elsworth left school to live with her aunt at Sussex Place, no idea of any danger to either side

from the young painter's visits presented itself to Mrs. Staniland's view.

Ronald himself, unfortunately, had not met Miss Elsworth many times before his peace of mind was seriously disturbed. To do him justice, he struggled hard to banish her face from his thoughts; he refused even the rare opportunities of seeing her that were afforded him; he tried to forget her in his work.

But the very ardour with which he set himself to paint only brought him into such further notice that Mrs. Staniland determined that he and no other should paint her niece's portrait, and he could not, or at all events did not, decline the commission.

The unhappy young man suffered a combination of torture and ecstasy during the first few sittings. Every day left him deeper in love and despair, for Sybil's manner gave him no reason for hope; and if it had done so, was he not bound to silence by the most elementary principles of honour? What right had he, who was only just beginning to make a living, to ask this or any other delicately-reared girl to step down to him into the struggle?

So he hid his passion under indifference—with the usual success in such cases; he had interested her from the first, so she was merely piqued by his apparent antipathy into the resolve to overcome it; he was not long in betraying himself, though quite unconsciously, or at least involuntarily, and she was strangely thrilled by the discovery of his secret.

Still he did not speak—he would have kept silent to

the end, but for a change in his prospects which released him from all further restraint; a distant and eccentric relative died and left him an unexpected legacy, enough to make it possible for him to marry without imprudence or selfishness.

He hesitated a little even then, for Sybil's moods had varied so capriciously of late that he was afraid to put his fate to the touch just then; but at last the opportunity came, and he took it, and she heard him to the end quite meekly, and he found himself accepted.

But upon one point she had insisted with the sweetest obstinacy: no one at home, not even her aunt, must be told of their engagement until she gave him leave to announce it. She had to consent to his writing to her father, who was out in India; but if he told anybody else, why—then, this wilful young person declared, there should be no engagement to be disclosed.

He was too desperately in love to run any risk by putting this resolution of hers to the test—he yielded, and had never been free from self-reproach since.

It had gone on for more than a month now, this most unsatisfactory of engagements. They saw one another but seldom—indeed for part of the time she had been away at Eastbourne. She wrote, and her letters were gay and affectionate; but when he met her again, she gave no sign by her manner of greeting him that he was more to her than others were.

It is true there were others present at the time, and true that she contrived to reassure him before he left by some apparently careless speech, to which her eyes and

voice gave a sweet and special meaning; but, for all that, the strain was telling on his self-respect, and he chafed under his false position more and more.

What he suffered under Babcock's references to Sybil will after this explanation be readily imagined; and now that by a happy accident he had met her, he felt the time had come to speak plainly.

She was the first who spoke. 'I thought this was one of the things we agreed we wouldn't do?' she observed, though with no very great show of displeasure.

'I didn't know I should have the luck to meet you just now,' he said, 'and you must let me speak to you, Sybil —there is something I want to say.'

She arched her pretty eyebrows. 'Something serious?' she inquired.

'Yes, rather.'

'Then suppose we find a seat somewhere? I can be so much more serious sitting down.'

They found a sheltered bench near the water's edge, where the wavelets were lapping half-heartedly. 'Now tell me all about it,' she said, looking distractingly lovely as she settled herself comfortably to listen.

'It's simply this, Sybil—I can't stand this secrecy any longer?'

'Oh, Ronald! but why? where would be the fun if everybody knew?'

'After all, Sybil, one doesn't—at least *I* didn't—get engaged for the fun of the thing; and if I had, I've had very little of it.'

'You might be serious without being disagreeable.'

'Is it disagreeable to object to have to play an underhand part?'

'Very, because, don't you see, Papa knows all about it—he must have had your letter a fortnight ago.'

'But your aunt doesn't—you know how much she has done for me; I never ought to have kept this from her.'

'Ah, but you couldn't help yourself, you see!' cried Sybil gaily; 'it was my secret as well as yours, and you were bound to keep it as long as I wished it kept.'

'And why were you so anxious to have it kept?'

She was looking at him with meditative eyes. 'Will you have a lot of little reasons, or one big one?' she asked.

'I should very much prefer the real one,' he said, rather grimly.

'Well,' said Sybil, 'the real one was; I'd set my heart on having my portrait at the Grosvenor this year.'

'I don't see the connection; if all goes well, it must be there now. Sir C—— has seen it, and I only want one more sitting to finish it.'

'And we're coming for that to-morrow. Yes, but, you foolish Ronald, if you had told Aunt Hilary when you wanted to, do you suppose you would ever have had the chance of finishing it in time? Why, I should never have been allowed to come near the studio, till we knew what Papa thought of you—and perhaps not then—all these weeks quite wasted! So that by that little stratagem of mine (for you might have known, if you hadn't been a goose, I never meant all I said!) just by that stratagem I've saved you a whole year of fame—because I have quite made up my mind that that portrait is going

to make you famous. And naturally,' she added, with a little laugh at her own vanity, 'I should like to be a little famous too.'

'If that is all,' said Campion, 'now the portrait is safe, you can't object to my speaking out.'

'But I do!' she said; 'don't tell aunt Hilary yet, Ronald.'

'But why? you must have some reason?'

'Surely we are very happy as we are!'

'Hardly, as far as I am concerned. Just think, Sybil, how often do I ever see you? Why, this is the first time since that evening at the Pontifexes' that I've had a chance of being alone with you. I have to be content with catching sight of you through some confounded crush, and think myself lucky if I get a look or a word in the course of the evening.'

'Isn't that what you ought to think? And really, you might bear it a little longer when I ask you—it isn't as if there was the least harm in it.'

'There wouldn't be if I was under no obligations to Mrs. Staniland—but for that I shouldn't complain; I dare say I should enjoy keeping this to ourselves. As it is, nothing can get rid of the fact that I'm behaving shabbily.'

'If you told her, do you know what would happen? at first she would try to treat me like a naughty little girl' (and she looked very like one indeed as she spoke), 'and then she would tell somebody about it—and everybody would know!'

'And what then?'

'Why, you know how people will come and fuss about and ask questions, and congratulate. I do hate all that so! It's all very well for you—*you* won't have to go through it.'

'As far as congratulations go, I fancy I'm in more danger than you. But what is there so very objectionable about it, after all?'

'Oh, I don't know,' and she gave a petulant little shrug. 'Every girl I particularly detest will make a point of rushing up directly she sees me, to give me little pecking kisses and gush. And I shall have to listen to: "So glad, dear love, so sweet of you to be romantic in these days—it's really quite idyllic—do tell me all about it!" and so on. And then all the old ladies, and the silly old gentlemen who try to be funny about it—Ronald, it will be horrid, and it's no use pretending it won't!'

'But it must come some time—your father will probably write to Mrs. Staniland soon, and he must mention it then.'

'Papa isn't very regular about letters, and at all events we can wait till he does write; it isn't at all nice of you to be so obstinate.'

Campion made a poor pretence at a laugh. 'Why don't you say in so many words that you are beginning to think you might have done a wiser thing than accept me? I suppose I oughtn't to wonder that you are not in any very great hurry to own me.'

If her face was any index to her feelings, Sybil Elsworth was honestly startled and wounded by such

doubts; her petulance (which was not more than half real) vanished; instantly all her childish wilfulness left her. 'If you mean what you say,' she said, and her voice trembled, 'it is very cruel: you know, or you ought to know, that I never had such a thought for one moment. I have always been so proud of you, Ronald!'

'Yet you can't acknowledge me! Sybil, if you are beginning to repent, if you have the slightest misgivings, don't, don't hide them under denials, tell me now—I can bear it better now than later.'

'You seem to be quite certain you will have to bear it some time!' she said with averted head.

'You may be asked to throw me over some day—soon, for what I know,—to listen to some fellow who is rich, well-connected, able to give you the position you ought to fill, in whose cause your aunt would put all the pressure she could upon you—some fellow like—well, like Lionel Babcock, for instance.'

Her colour deepened. 'At least you might wait till you *are* thrown over. Poor Lionel Babcock—isn't it rather absurd to be jealous of him?'

'Whether it is or not,' said Campion, 'I want to feel sure of you, Sybil; and you must see that this concealment is putting me more hopelessly in the wrong every day, making it easier to separate us.'

'If I had only known you felt like that about it!' said Sybil,—'it frightens me, Ronald, when you let such fancies get hold of you. But you shall have no excuse for them any longer. I did hate a fuss, but I won't mind

it now. Aunt Hilary shall be told if you think it right. There, will that satisfy you?'

'It is everything I asked. Don't think me a brute for insisting on my own way in this, darling, even now when I know there was no ground for doubting you.'

'I think you might have seen that from the first,' she said, 'but I suppose it is your nature and you can't help it, so I must forgive you. And I will tell Aunt Hilary everything this very evening!'

'I can't think of letting you do that,' he said; 'it ought to come from me.'

She gave a little sigh of very obvious relief. 'If you think it best,' she said. 'And when will you tell her?'

'To-morrow, as soon as the sitting is over.'

'We shall be scolded dreadfully, I know,' said Sybil ruefully. 'Still, so long as it relieves your mind—— And now,' she added brightly, with a complete return to her original gaiety, 'don't let us think of disagreeables any more. I've a surprise for you. While you were persuading yourself, I dare say, that I had completely forgotten all about you, what do you suppose I was doing for you this morning?—guess.'

'I can't tell, I'm sure,' he said, 'if it wasn't slippers.'

'Of course it wasn't slippers!' said Sybil indignantly; 'to think you've no more imagination than that! It was nothing of that kind—I don't go in for it. Well, I had better tell you. I bought you a little present—you know I never gave you anything in return for that lovely ring, which I've never worn yet.'

'You gave me this,' he said, taking the hand which was nearer to him.

'That didn't cost me anything to give; this is a real present—are you grateful, or will you tell me how foolish it is of me to waste my money on presents?—which is what Aunt Hilary used to say when I gave her anything. To be sure,' she added reflectively, 'I always had to borrow the money from her first. But you will try to like this?'

'I think I can promise that,' he said; 'I haven't any words to thank you with.'

'You must wait till you see it—perhaps you won't care about it. I don't know what made me think you would, but I'll tell you how I came to get it. I was driving with Aunt Hilary this morning, and we went into a little bric-à-brac shop near Oxford Street, where aunt had heard of some Sherraton she wanted to look at. Well, the shop was kept by the dearest old man, who wore a velvet cap, and seemed so low-spirited; and while Aunt Hilary was upstairs looking at Buhl cabinets, the old man poured out all his sorrow to me. It seems he has had nothing but misfortune for months, losses and breakages and burglaries and fires—all kinds of trouble, poor thing. Well, I felt so sorry for him, particularly as I knew quite well that Aunt Hilary wouldn't buy anything—she never does; so, as I had made up my mind to get something for you, I thought I would get it there to cheer him up a little. But all the things were so dear except one. I'm not going to tell you what it is, because you'll know very soon; but it has quite a little story connected with it. It was dug up a short time ago by some

Captain Somebody, who had to leave the army shortly after for some disgrace he got into—so the old man told me. And the ship which brought it over from India was wrecked and all the cargo lost except just that one thing, which floated safely to land wedged inside a lifebelt. So it's rather a curiosity in its way.'

'Evidently,' said Campion.

'But I had such a fright while I was buying it, for in the very middle who should come in but Lionel Babcock! He came smiling up in that patronising way of his, swelling his chest out, and said, "Well, little one, and what are we throwing our pocket-money away on now, eh?" So of course I had to show him, and then he wanted to know what possible use could I find for that. And I told him I had bought it because his last photographs didn't do him justice, and then he went upstairs to find Aunt Hilary, and I had just time to give your address and swear my old gentleman to silence. It ought to be at your house by this time. I do wonder what you'll think when you see it!'

'I shall think it my chief treasure, whatever it is. I shall keep it all my life.'

'But will you really, Ronald? Somehow, I don't like to think of your ever parting with it. Will you promise to keep it—whatever happens?'

'Whatever happens,' he agreed, smiling at her earnest charming face.

'Well,' said Sybil, 'we've had a nice long talk and only one quarrel, and now I must go, Ronald.'

'Not yet,' he pleaded.

'Yes,' she rejoined, 'now. I coaxed Aunt to drive home and leave me at the Mastermans', because I wanted to talk with that odious Alice; and I assured her I could find my way across the Park alone. She said one never knows what kind of people one may meet, which is quite true, for I hadn't the least idea I should meet you. I ought to go back at once, or she will be feeling nervous about me. No, you mustn't walk a step further with me—I forbid it. You will have your own way to-morrow.'

They parted, and he watched her graceful figure till it disappeared in the dusk, and then he too made his way out of the Park, with a heart lighter than it had been when he entered. Sybil had shown a deeper affection, more real feeling, than she had ever betrayed before; his worst doubts he could put behind him—he could afford to disregard Babcock now. And so, relieved and hopeful, with a pleasant anticipation of finding Sybil's present awaiting his return, he turned up into the broad silent street which would lead him to Romanoff Road.

He reached the corner, and was a few yards from his studio, when he noticed a youth, an errand-boy apparently, preparing to cross the road with a most superfluous degree of caution for that unfrequented quarter; again and again when half-way across he would retreat to the curbstone he had left, looking this way and that as if completely demoralised by nervousness.

At last he seemed to pluck up courage and made a run for it, with an uncalled-for determination which mightily amused Campion; he was laughing still when an empty

hansom dashed round the corner and bowled the poor boy over a few inches from the footpath.

The cabman, without waiting to see what injury he had done, whipped his horse to a gallop and was gone before Campion, horrified and shocked as he was, could stop him or ascertain his number.

He could only run to the boy and pick him up and wait there while he leaned, white and gasping, against the railings of Campion's garden. When the boy could speak, he said, 'You'll bear me out, Mister, as it wasn't none of my doing; the guv'nor, he told me to be keerful, and I've been keerful enough—if it's broke it ain't my fault noway.'

'Never mind that,' said Campion, 'the chief thing is are *you* broken anywhere?'

'I don't think as how I'm broke anywheres, though I feel all nohow; the shaft of that there 'ansom ketched me on the shoulder and sent me a-spinning. But feel o' that there parcel, sir—do it seem all right to you, through the paper? Well, that's a good thing anyhow. If you knew the job I've 'ad a-bringin' of it 'ere, you'd feel for me, you would indeed! I took a 'bus at Tot'nim Court Road, and blimy if both the 'orses didn't go down! then I took another at the Cirkis, and we got a-racing down the Edgeware Road, and run into a butcher's cart and very near turned over that time. *I* never see anything like it! Then sez I, "Not any more ridin' for me," I sez, "I'll walk the rest." And, would you believe it, sir—if all the kebs and 'busses and carts there was didn't seem bent on runnin' over me! Never run sech a erran' in all my born

days! Why, I was like a old woman by the time I got 'ere, and just as I sez, "D—— the himage!" sez I, "I'm quit of it now!" round come that there gallopadin' 'ansom, and over I goes like a skittle!'

'I saw,' said Ronald, 'you weren't to blame in the least; and now you had better come in with me and have some brandy, and we'll see if you've broken any bones.'

'I must deliver this 'ere parcel and get that off of my mind first,' said the boy staunchly, and then Campion discovered that it was addressed to himself.

'Why, it must be Sybil's present!' he said as he saw the label. It was curious to think of the perils it had run of miscarrying and even perishing; its escape struck him as a sort of special providence.

He had the boy attended to and examined at once. Fortunately he had escaped with a bruise or two and a slight shaking. 'I never heard no cab,' said Bales, 'the boy's been fightin' on the way—them young raskils will get fighting—he never got them bruises in no accident!' and no argument would move him from his opinion.

Meanwhile Campion had unpacked the precious parcel in full confidence of finding something with a pretty fanciful association about it, some graceful and well-chosen addition to his household gods.

His spirits fell suddenly at the reality: it was a household god literally enough, being nothing more nor less than an extremely ugly oriental idol, such as a Buddhist shrine in China or Burmah might contain.

It was made of a dingy mottled kind of alabaster with a sparkle here and there under the smooth surface, the

robes were faintly indicated by a dull red lacquer, and it was represented squatting cross-legged with great fan-like hands on its knees.

The eyes in the broad flat moon-face were closed, and the general expression was one of smug and sleepy self-satisfaction—as if it were being reverently tickled by an unseen attendant.

This, then, was Sybil's first present! and at the sight of the inscrutable smile on its calm countenance, Campion's demon of doubt again stirred; the smile seemed to be saying, 'Now *do* I look the sort of thing a girl would give a lover she seriously and honestly cared for?' and the answer he gave was, 'No, she has sent me this in some fantastic spirit of mockery—not love; she has been playing with me after all!'

CHAPTER III.

FROM A PEDESTAL.

CAMPION was still gloomily staring at his ill-favoured gift when Bales returned from seeing the errand-boy safely off the premises. 'I suppose,' remarked the attendant, with a dubious and inquiring inflexion, 'I suppose as that there himage struck you favourable from a ornamental p'int of view, or you wouldn't have spent your money on it, sir?'

'It was a present, Bales,' said Campion, unconsciously vindicating his own judgment at the expense of Sybil's.

'A present was it, sir? Well, if the 14th of Febry hadn't been gone so long I should have thought someone had sent you a walentine, and picked you out a partickler ugly one. It must have been meant comical-like, I should say.'

'Heavy sort of joke, Bales—but it's a curious thing in its way, as you can see.'

'If I wanted to give a present, I should choose something more tasty, I should; if you must send a bust, there's plenty on them Italian men's trays as have a more Christian look to 'em.'

'That's likely enough. This is an idol, an old Indian idol.'

'Don't you believe it, Mr. Campion; it's a deal more likely to be a sham—one of them Brummagem imitations, as we keep the heathen going with; why—phew, ah!' and he sat down suddenly upon the nearest chair—'excuse the liberty I'm taking, but one of my old spasims ketched me rather severe in the side!'

'You've no faith in antiquities, eh, Bales?'

'Why, no, sir, I can't say as I consider them altogether credulous; I judge from my own observation. Now, there's that place you took a likeness of when you was down in Wiltshire last spring, Stone-Enge. Well, you'll never persuade *me* those big stones are genuine. What did them hancient Britons that lived up trees know about building? and d'ye think any stone could stand our climate for all these 'undreds of years? Look at our public buildings, erected quite recent and mouldering already! Why, I dessay you, bein' young, believe in that there Cleopatry's Needle they've set up on the Embankment. *I* don't. The moment I set eyes on it I said, "It's a do; all them marks and picturs on it have been cribbed right off from our Crystal Pallis, which I myself can well remember when it wasn't built. That's what I go upon, d'ye see? No, no, don't you be took in, sir. It's the same with them old marsters; why, you know what they are as well as I do. I know a party myself as turns 'em out by the gross—he's only got to draw and colour as bad as he knows how, and hang it in the chimbley to meller. There's some in the National Gal'ry it's true that are clean enough, but your

own common sense 'll tell you they're too well coloured ever to have been done in them old muddy-evil times as they call it. They hadn't the education for it.'

'You're a wise man, Bales; the nineteenth's the only genuine century, eh? all others are spurious, and their works prove it. And now suppose you suggest some place for this idol—how would it look on the low bookcase?'

'It wouldn't look no handsomer than what it would elsewhere,' said Bales.

'Try it on the bracket where the Hermes is now—you had better fetch the steps perhaps.'

Bales fetched a pair of steps, and, bringing them to the mantelpiece, mounted laboriously, and, after deposing the reduced but faithful plaster copy of the antique, prepared to establish the oriental in the room of the classic divinity.

He turned on the steps, holding the image out at arm's length, as he remarked with strong disgust, 'Just think now that there's niggers so ignirent as to fall down and worship this here old figgerhead—why, I shouldn't have believed——'

But what Bales would not have believed was not destined to appear on that occasion, for at that instant he lost his balance and fell, accompanied or preceded by his burden. A wild clutch at the small overmantel brought the entire piece down, with its valuable load of old Bohemian glass, Venetian pottery, and Roman terra-cotta, the hard-won spoils of Campion's continental wanderings, and Bales lay on his back in the midst of the ruin.

'Well,' said Campion, rather grimly, as he relieved him of the overmantel, and picked him out of the fragments, 'you've contrived to come down on a rather extensive scale, Bales.'

Bales sat up and rolled his eyes: 'I've come down on the edge of the fender,' he said. 'It 'll take me a hour to clear up this mess,' he added, in an injured tone.

'I didn't make it, confound you!' said Campion, laughing in spite of his anger; 'here, get up and collect the fragments. My Hermes smashed to atoms, I see, and I suppose the idol has come off no better.'

'The idol, sir, being made uncommon strong, has remained 'ole and entire, which is more than I can say the same of my ed; my skull's all in fractions, and my brain's in that state of concussion, I 'ardly know what I'm a sayin' of, or whether I'm settin' down or standing up. All I can say is, the next time your friend takes a fancy for sending you a present, I hope he'll choose one that's easier to 'andle, that's all.'

But at least Sybil's gift had escaped the slightest scratch, and Ronald, in the midst of his annoyance at the wholesale destruction, was glad that he would not have to tell her that her idol was in fragments.

Where should he place it now? Perhaps, after all, the studio and not the sitting-room was the best place for it, and there Sybil would see it when she came the next day; he had a little Chinese pedestal round which a gaudy dragon curled itself, and upon this pedestal he established the idol for the present.

The next morning, when he came in to his breakfast,

it was to find a letter on his plate, the stamp and marking of which made his hands shake as he opened the envelope; he knew it contained the long-expected answer from Sybil's father, Colonel Elsworth.

It was a cautious and rather hesitating letter. The Colonel began by saying that, if Campion's position and projects were all he had stated them to be, there could be no reasonable objection to the match, particularly as his sister, who was a better judge of these things than he could be, had allowed them to become engaged; for he presumed that her consent would naturally have been obtained in the first place. Still, he added, as a father, he was bound to take nothing for granted; he had been some years away from England, which would probably account for Campion's name and works being unfamiliar to him, but he preferred to make all necessary and proper inquiries before he could allow any distinct engagement, especially as he had not heard as yet what his sister's views in the matter might be. He hoped to be home on leave very shortly, and then it would be time enough to decide, and he left it to Mrs. Staniland (as he should write and tell her himself in the course of the week) to say on what terms Campion and his daughter should be permitted to meet in the interval before his return, or whether they should meet at all. Campion might save time by showing her that letter if he thought fit.

It was perhaps as favourable as he could reasonably expect; he had no cause to dread the result of the Colonel's 'inquiries;' after all, thanks to the legacy, which would doubtless be paid in soon now, he was able to marry

without positive imprudence, and he was beginning to be recognised in his art as a man who might make his mark some day. Yes, if Sybil only remained true to him—for already the 'if' had thrust itself once more into his hopes—he had no fear of overcoming all opposition.

Then came a disturbing thought—what if Mrs. Staniland, too, had heard from the Colonel that morning? then Campion's own confession would be forestalled, and she might be hopelessly prejudiced against him. The probability made his work fitful and unsteady until the time fixed for the appointment, and when the studio bell announced that Sybil, and Sybil's aunt, had arrived, he felt extremely ill at ease.

But Mrs. Staniland's manner, which was the same as usual, showed him at once that she suspected nothing as yet; the Colonel must have put off writing or missed the mail, and Campion was still in time.

She was a stately, handsome old lady, with iron-gray hair veined with silver, large and luminous eyes, and a complexion still unwrinkled, and tinted like a delicate apple; she spoke with a certain incisiveness, and even when she meant to be most gracious her tone was the tone of one having authority.

'Now, Mr. Campion,' she began as she shook hands, 'this really must be the last sitting; I was going to send for you to come and tell me about the picture on the day we came home from Eastbourne, but it really was such a frightful evening I didn't like to send my man out.'

'It only wants one more sitting,' he said, 'and then I shall not have to trouble you like this again.'

'Oh, I don't mind any *necessary* inconvenience. Now tell me, do you want quite such a glare of light as you have here? *I* should have thought it so unbecoming to any complexion—but you are the best judge, no doubt. I'm going to settle myself down as comfortably as I can, and you get to work, and let us have it over. You surely haven't left Willoughby in the carriage, Sybil; ah, no, there he is. Willoughby, come here, sir, and keep mistress company!'

Willoughby was the pug, who reluctantly abandoned the tour of inspection he had begun, to lie by her side in a little Oriental divan, the one oasis of luxury in that artistic desert, in which Mrs. Staniland was now established with a work-basket, books, and papers as specifics for *ennui*.

Sybil had thrown off her heavy furred cloak, and was standing before her portrait in the pretty white dress in which she was being painted, and he came and stood at her side.

'Are you satisfied?' he asked.

'I—I think it is very clever.' He thought he detected a certain embarrassment in her tone.

'But not all you could wish? Please be quite candid.'

'Well—don't you think, if you were to give me a little more colour. Am I quite as pale as you make me?'

'A painter sees things with different eyes—that particular tone is a very great charm.'

'But I can't believe I look my best when I'm not well.'

'You must understand that the picture is still very far from finished; you will find many changes no doubt when you next see it. I hope you will own then that I have not quite failed.'

He spoke rather distantly, partly owing to Mrs. Staniland's presence, but he was also a little offended; that warm creamy pallor of hers had no suggestion in it of ill-health, and was done full justice to upon his canvas. She might have perceived as much, he thought.

'You seem rather long in getting posed to-day, Sybil,' said her aunt from her distant corner.

'We have begun now,' said Campion. 'Now, Miss Elsworth, if you can only keep like that for a few minutes.'

Sybil indulged herself in a little mock-petulant grimace, after which she subsided, and he threw all his energies into the task of transferring to his canvas something of her provoking fascination and adorable capriciousness.

In her secret soul Mrs. Staniland did not consider art a sufficiently serious occupation to be carried on in silence, and she began a conversation by asking whether Campion had heard of her latest trial. 'Yarker, my butler, has left me—oh, a month ago now,' she explained; 'so inconsiderate and troublesome of the man, just when he had got into my ways. But nothing would do for him but he must go and be a policeman. So I told him, "Of course, if you're bent upon going, you must, but I hope your conscience will reproach you sometimes under your new policeman's helmet." That is always the way with every

person I am interested in and try to assist. You remember that under kitchen-maid I told you of—the girl I rescued from singing at low music halls?'

'The girl who was beaten by a brutal father because she declined (with perfect propriety) to sing some of her songs?' inquired Campion.

'Yes, *that* girl. Well, her scruples allowed her to sing all over my house—and I cannot imagine how any songs could be *worse!* Then she was so violent, threw saucepans at the gentlest reproof, and her language was simply horrible. So she had to go, and now—would you believe it?—she comes to the door every other afternoon with a piano-organ. Ah, it's an ungrateful, deceitful world, or so I have found it. Why, even that young piano-tuner who asked my opinion so modestly of some really charming little verses—*he's* a bitter disappointment!'

'Why, what has he done?'

'Well, he hadn't done the verses. Copied them, if you please, almost word for word, from an old American magazine where Sybil found them—the only alteration he made was to spoil the metre. And when I taxed him with it he had the impudence to tell me there was no international copyright, and that he had only "adapted" the poems. Really it does seem as if I was doomed to be deceived sooner or later by everybody I try to help!'

'Not everyone, I hope,' said Campion, with a passing pang of conscience.

'I was not thinking of you when I said that. I am sure you will prove yourself an exception. By the way,

I expect my brother, Sybil's father, home on leave shortly. I ought to have heard from him before this, but he never did write home regularly. When he does come I must bring him here to see you; it's so good for a young man to have a few influential friends!'

'As I have found!' said Campion.

'Oh, well, when I discover genius in any form I like to encourage it. I wish I could say the result was more generally satisfactory. What is the matter with Willoughby? he has stolen away where I can't see him, but I can tell from his bark that he's excited. Do kindly go and see, Mr. Campion, for I can't leave my embroidery.'

'I assure you,' said Campion, 'he is not likely to do any harm here.'

'But I'm sure some rat must be worrying him, poor dear; please go and drive it away.'

'Not a rat in the place, I give you my word,' protested Campion.

'Let me get down and see,' said Sybil.

'You—not for worlds!' cried Campion; 'it's too absorbing just now for me to think of allowing you to move. I'll attend to Master Willoughby as soon as I can.'

'Mayn't I turn my head?' she asked.

'Yes, if you will keep your hands still.'

They were beautiful hands, and, as they lay lightly folded in all their charming indolence, he was rendering their pliant curves and satin surface with the eager ardour, the breathless excited care of a painter who was also a lover.

There was a mischievous sparkle in Sybil's eyes when

she turned her head towards him. 'Would you like to know what it really is that is frightening my aunt's pug?' she asked with her audacious smile.

'Not one of my productions, I hope,' he said.

'No; he seems to have taken one of his sudden dislikes to that very hideous little image over there on the pedestal. Is that a new acquisition? I don't remember seeing it here last time!' She said this with the utmost unconsciousness, only her eyes danced.

Campion met those eyes with rather stern and serious ones. 'It was given to me only yesterday,' he replied, 'by a friend.'

'Singular thing for a friend to give, don't you think?' remarked Sybil.

'Depends rather on the spirit it was given in,' Campion replied.

'What a horrid phrase—as if it came in a bottle like a pickled snake! But you must have thought just when you first saw it that your friend was laughing at you?'

He frowned slightly. 'I have thought so ever since—never more than now. And yet I have tried to believe too that my—my friend would not have deliberately stooped to trifle with me.'

Sybil's eyes were soft and repentant at once: 'I think you are right,' she said softly, and she forgot that she had no right to clasp her hands just then. 'Very likely your friend bought it because at the time he really thought it was a curiosity and interesting in its way. Perhaps he fancied, too, that whatever it was—coming from—from him, you know—you would value it?'

'Now you have put it in that way, I feel sure of it. And the friend was not mistaken. I do value it.'

'If I was giving someone I—liked a present, I should be careful to choose a rather hideous one, because then if he cared about it I should know it was not for its own sake, but for mine. Certainly your friend's gift is hideous enough, with that remarkably unpleasant smile, isn't it?'

'Gifts are not to be criticised—are they?—at least about the mouth. And I'm not sure that I am not learning to love this one for its own sake; there's something in its face that distinctly grows upon one.'

'I should be very sorry if it were to distinctly grow upon *me*. But do you really like it?'

'I really do. To me there's an irresistible fascination about a really genuine ex-idol. Think of the power it has enjoyed in its day, the enthusiasm it has aroused, the faith it has inspired. This reduced idol has once kept a temple of its own, with a staff of priests, all engaged in ministering to its requirements and celebrating its virtues. Nothing expected of it either, except an occasional miracle whenever it felt equal to it, and even that was probably performed by deputy. There it sat in an atmosphere of incense and flowers, hearing its own praises from an endless string of grovelling votaries.'

'It must have grown very conceited,' said Sybil, 'or fearfully bored.'

'Conceited, perhaps—but I doubt whether there is any real boredom about idolatry as far as the object is concerned; none of our popular idols have ever been heard to complain of the monotony of the thing—perhaps

because it did not last long enough. As for this fellow, he enjoyed it all thoroughly—you can see that in his face. I dare say a sense of humour is left out of most idols, otherwise it must have amused him to have his interference in so much request, and find himself propitiated with presents to keep him good-tempered, when all the time he knew he hadn't influence enough to stop a shower or cure a cold.'

'We are talking as if it was something real,' said Sybil.

'A good many real people have been much more artificial, I dare say; it has been a reality to generations, which must have encouraged it to believe in itself as implicitly as anybody. And now, what a change for it! No one even knows whom it is intended to represent—unless it is an image of Buddha, which for Buddha's sake I hope it isn't. Nobody consults it even on the weather, nobody gratifies or even understands its tastes in the matter of flowers or genuflections. It's a mere chattel, a curiosity, "a fellow that hath had losses" without the consolation of "everything handsome about him."'

'How pathetic you are!' exclaimed Sybil 'I shall have to send you some Lent lilies for it. But it seems happy and contented enough; just see how it sits, smiling down on that poor frantic pug, like a cat on a wall.'

Willoughby, who had evidently taken a violent prejudice against the inoffensive stranger, had been growling and sniffing round its pedestal for some time, and now, unable to refrain from more open manifestations of dislike, he was barking furiously.

'Mr. Campion,' said Mrs. Staniland, 'may I ask you

once more to bring Willoughby to me; it's not good for him—all this excitement. He's so sensitive about any ugliness, poor pet, and that image of yours seems to affect his nerves; do put it where it won't aggravate him.'

Campion had just fallen back to catch the effect of his latest touches, and, as he dispersed some of the colour with his thumb, and looked about for a rag, he said, 'I should have said the aggravation was all on Willoughby's side,' but in another moment, 'by Jove, he's brought the whole thing over!'

'Oh, Ronald!' cried Sybil, forgetting where they were for a moment, 'see—the poor dog! Oh! it's horrible—move it, quick!'

'Has Willoughby done any mischief?' inquired Mrs. Staniland, preparing to put down her work, and leave the divan with a stately deliberation.

'To himself, I fear,' replied Campion, as he went to the aid of the animal, whose last furious leap had upset the pedestal, and brought the image down upon his own devoted head.

The idol lay face upwards, wearing what the immortal biographer of 'Hon. Chief Justice Mookerjee' would describe as the 'soft and fascinating beams of a simper,' and underneath it lay the ill-starred pug, past all insults.

Mrs. Staniland was bending over him. 'Willoughby—oh, my poor pug, speak to me!—oh, I don't know *what* I'm saying! Sybil, fetch my salts.'

She might have applied the gold-headed bottle quite as usefully to the idol's flat nostrils. To quote the biographer once more, 'it proved after all as if to milk the

ram,' for the pug had already departed 'to reside with the morning stars.'

Sybil stood by, looking rather pale, and distressed for her aunt's sake, for she had never been very warmly attached to the deceased Willoughby. 'Oh, Aunt Hilary,' she said, 'I am so very, very sorry—such an unfortunate accident!'

Mrs. Staniland rose, gray and grim, and turned towards Campion. 'It was no *accident*,' she said harshly, 'it was wilful, culpable carelessness, if no worse. To leave a heavy stone on a rickety pedestal, where a breath might upset it. No; it could not have been left there without some motive.'

Campion could hardly believe his own ears: 'Do you really suggest that I planned this?' he asked.

'Oh, I charge nothing! You were never really pleased to have my poor pet in your studio, and no trap could have acted better than this one. And I begged you over and over again to interfere and take Willoughby away. But, no, I was only a silly old woman, not worth any attention from such a clever young gentleman. I dare say you hoped to see him hurt himself. Well, you have had your wish!'

The ruffled old lady's eyes were very bright, and her cheeks were now stained a clear crimson; she was in a towering passion. It would have been unfair to take any serious notice of her wild accusations, which she would probably forget by the following day, and Campion restrained his own impatience.

But the chief thought in his mind was, 'I cannot tell

her about Sybil just now. 'I think you are very unjust, Mrs. Staniland,' was all he said.

'Not the least unjust, sir. I had a right, which you compel me to remind you of, to expect something very different. I think you owe something to me, and how have you repaid me?'

'You are repaying yourself, Mrs. Staniland, when you speak to me in this way.'

Ronald, more to cover his own rising anger than for anything else, was carefully placing the idol exactly upon the centre of an old cabinet—unluckily the action seemed only to further inflame his patroness.

'Is this a deliberate insult, or mere callousness,' she demanded, 'this that you are doing now?'

'It seems only too easy for me to offend this morning,' he said, 'but I have no notion how I am offending now.'

'And you actually intend to keep that dangerous bloodstained object amongst your ornaments—in spite of all!'

'Really, Mrs. Staniland, do you expect me to have it hung?' he said, with an irritation he could control no longer.

'It pleases you to be sarcastic, sir,' she replied 'But no one with a spark of decent feeling, to say nothing of taste, would care to keep such a thing about him after this, supposing it had been a mere accident. No, he would throw it out of window, give it away, break it to atoms—anything rather than that!'

Sybil had been standing a little apart, listening with downcast eyes, slightly ashamed, perhaps, of the whole

thing, and yet, as the corners of her lips betrayed, quite alive to the ludicrous side of the situation. Now, at this latest display of unreasonableness on her aunt's part, she raised her eyes, and looked at her lover with sudden curiosity to know what he would say.

'I can't do that,' he replied, 'for the fact is, this idol was given to me by a very dear friend——'

'Who made him promise, Aunt Hilary—promise solemnly—never to part with it!' Sybil added, eagerly.

'How do you know that, Sybil, if you please?' said her aunt, sharply, and Miss Sybil remained discreetly silent.

'It is the fact, however!' said Campion, 'I could not part with it even if I wished to!'

'Well!' said Mrs. Staniland, bitterly, 'I have my reward, I suppose. I might have expected it!'

And then there was an awkward pause, for the studio door had opened, and Lionel Babcock came, self-satisfied and serene as usual, into the highly electrical atmosphere.

Babcock noticed things and persons in sections. His mind being a good deal concentrated upon himself, he had shaken hands with Campion without having observed that he was not alone. 'I've brought the picture I want you to help me with,' he began, 'got it outside in a cab——' here he stopped, and became vaguely aware of the others, 'Oh—apologise, I'm sure, why, it's Mrs. Staniland—so it is, and my little Sybil—what luck, this *is* jolly now. I am glad, by Jove I am!'

He was all geniality and boyish heartiness just then, (a manner which he considered became him rather well)

he shook hands warmly, as if he had not seen them for months.

'Well!' he said, 'and how do you think this young lady's portrait is getting on, Mrs. Staniland?'

'I have been given other things to think about,' said Mrs. Staniland, stiffly.

'Have you, though?' said Babcock. 'Hallo! why, Sybil, what's our cross-legged friend, the idol, doing here? You don't mean to say you've brought him here to get Mr. Campion's opinion; *he* doesn't know anything about Indian idols. Now, I've *been* in India. I could have told you in a second whether it was worth anything, when you were buying it yesterday, if you had asked me!'

'Stop,' said Mrs. Staniland, 'what are you talking about, Lionel?'

'Eh?' exclaimed Babcock. 'Why, surely you remember yesterday in Hanway Street; I came in while you were buying it; we had a little joke about it, you and I, didn't we, my child?'

'Did we?' said Sybil, 'I have forgotten!'

'Now I begin to understand,' said Mrs. Staniland. 'Lionel, will you be so good as to go outside and see if you can find the carriage, and wait there till we come out. I shall not be long—but I have some business to arrange with Mr. Campion first.'

'By all means,' said Babcock; 'wouldn't disturb you for worlds.'

When he had gone, Mrs. Staniland turned upon Sybil: 'Now, Sybil, no fibs, if you please—it seems *you* are the friend who gave this highly desirable gift.'

Campion was about to speak—but he was checked. 'Not you, please, yet, I want my niece to answer.'

'Yes, Aunt Hilary, I gave it!' said Sybil.

'And may I ask if you are in the habit of sending presents to young men with whom you are slightly acquainted?' her aunt demanded.

'Not as a general rule,' explained Sybil, 'but—but it makes some difference, doesn't it, when you are engaged to the person? I thought it did.'

'When you are *what*?' cried Mrs. Staniland; 'are you insane, Sybil?'

'The truth is, Mrs. Staniland, that Sybil has promised to be my wife,' said Campion.

'And how long may this have been going on?'

'About six weeks,' he answered.

'Indeed—six weeks! I congratulate you both on your talent for intrigue and concealment.'

'We wrote to papa, directly we knew it ourselves,' said Sybil, 'and we were going to tell you this very day.'

'Most considerate of you, really; for of course I had no claim, being only your guardian and his best friend, to be told at all.'

'It was not Ronald's fault; he wanted to tell you at first, but I—I wouldn't let him.'

'I don't know whom to admire most. And has my brother written to approve of this very prudent arrangement?'

'I got his answer this morning,' said Ronald, as he handed her the Colonel's letter. He felt extremely small.

Thanks to Babcock, their secret had been disclosed in the most disastrous manner, and at the worst possible time.

Mrs. Staniland read the letter with pursed lips, and then returned it to Campion. 'My brother,' she observed, 'seems to have taken it for granted that you would not have concealed this from me; but Horace is too ready to give other people credit for possessing a sense of honour.

'Aunt Hilary!' cried Sybil, 'Ronald always wanted to tell you.'

'Hold your tongue, Sybil; Mr. Campion ought to be very well able to defend himself.'

'Oh!' exclaimed Campion, 'I make no excuses.'

'I can find none. Well, sir, my brother has left me full discretion, it appears, until his return. I shall exercise it. What I have heard gives me very little cause to trust either of you. I forbid you, Mr. Ronald Campion, to call at my house or attempt to see my niece without my permission. The least you can do is to engage now not to make your conduct any worse.'

Campion looked at Sybil; her eyes said, 'promise anything.' 'I will engage,' he stipulated, 'not to attempt to see her for the present, provided you allow us to write to one another.'

Mrs. Staniland gave a short harsh laugh. 'Oh, I shall not attempt the impossible,' she said. 'Sybil understands, or she ought to do so, that she must abide by her father's decision. If you choose to correspond in the meantime, I don't suppose I could prevent it if I would. But no meetings, you understand.'

'I will wait patiently,' said Campion.

'And so will I, Ronald,' said Sybil softly.

'Then I think that is all. As for the portrait, that must do as best it can. If you have a conscience, Mr. Campion, it should be troubling you now.'

'It is,' said Ronald, as he made a movement to open the door.

'Thank you, we do not require any help from you,' said Mrs. Staniland. 'Mr. Babcock is outside—good day.'

She took up the body of the departed Willoughby, which she had laid upon the divan, and swept haughtily out of the painting room, followed by Sybil, who threw Campion a parting glance of half-comic despair and resignation.

Shortly after, Babcock came in with a large canvas. 'Here you are, my boy,' he said, 'throw in an appropriate figure, and earn my undying gratitude. I say, has there been anything in the shape of a row?'

'Well, yes,' said Campion, 'I think I may say there has.'

'Ha! you've had the ill-luck to offend our charming Sybil, eh? She's touchy! oh, yes, deucedly touchy! But don't you mind, old chap, you know what I told you yesterday. I've some little influence in that quarter, and if I can make it all right for you, why, command me.'

'Thanks,' Campion said, 'but Miss Elsworth and I have had no quarrel.'

'Then it's the old lady! Well, I know you must have had a good deal to put up with. Anything to do with Willoughby? I see he's gone aloft; always knew

that beast would go off suddenly one day. What was the row about, eh?'

'My dear fellow, that's my affair.'

'Excuse me,' said Babcock, puffing his cheeks importantly, 'but, as one who may be rather closely connected with the family, don't you know, I think it's my affair as well.'

'Then I will tell you, and you will see what right you had to be told. Mrs. Staniland has just discovered, thanks to you, what I was about to disclose myself—that Miss Elsworth and I were engaged.'

'The devil you are!' cried Babcock sharply.

'I should have told you yesterday,' said Campion, 'if I had not been pledged to secrecy.'

Babcock had turned extremely red. 'If that's so,' he said, after a moment's delay, 'you have made a pretty considerable fool of me between you.'

'What do you mean?' said Campion, sternly.

'Nothing; only if I know anything of women—and I used to imagine I did—well there! What was it Brabantio said to Othello after the council scene? "She has deceived her father, and may thee!" The quotation isn't quite on all fours, but it's near enough. I'll reserve my congratulations—and it's just possible they may be a trifle fly-blown before I have an opportunity of offering them. By-by!'

'Ta-ta!' growled Campion.

When Babcock had gone, Campion paced the studio restlessly; he was ill at ease, discontented with the part he had been made to play; distrustful, he knew not why,

of the future. Everything had gone wrong on this most unlucky morning; and, though he knew Babcock too well to pay much attention to his windy insinuations, he felt that Sybil and himself had been forced that day to take paths that would lead them ever farther asunder.

CHAPTER IV.

LAST TOUCHES.

By the next morning Campion's spirits had somewhat risen. After all, this untoward rupture with Mrs. Staniland was not likely to be final. Before many weeks he would, in all probability, find himself in a position which could not be fairly considered detrimental.

The payment of the legacy which had been so opportunely left him could not be long delayed. And then he had high expectations with respect to his two Academy pictures, and he knew that his portrait of Sybil Elsworth would attract some attention at the Grosvenor. So that if only Sybil remained staunch and true to him, he had no reason, even with Mrs. Staniland against him, to expect dismissal from the Colonel.

He found on his breakfast-table a letter in a blue envelope, on which he read the name of the solicitors who had first informed him of his legacy. The executors were ready to pay it in already, he concluded, with satisfaction; but he had scarcely opened the envelope before his satisfaction vanished with his appetite.

For the letter was in the following terms:

Slipcup deceased.

Dear Sir,—We are instructed by the exors. to lose no time in informing you that on sending down to Somerset House this day for grant of probate of the will of above deceased we discovered that a *caveat* had been entered, the object of which, as we have subsequently ascertained, is to have such will declared void, on the ground that at the time of its execution testator was of unsound mind. You will not need to be reminded that, should the proceedings which will probably now be necessary in the Probate Division have the result of upsetting the will in question, all legacies thereunder will fail in consequence; and without, of course, expressing any opinion here as to our opponents' case, we would venture to impress upon you the step that they have taken is one which may very seriously prejudice your interests as one of the legatees.

We are, etc.,

MOORE, BRADSHAW, and MOORE.

New Square, Lincoln's Inn

Uneasy recollections of his relative's reputed 'oddness' came back to Campion as he read this letter. He had scarcely known him by sight, but till now he had flattered himself that he owed his unexpected legacy to the testator's pride in a kinsman's rising fame, and it was the more unpleasant to see in it only additional proof of eccentricity.

He thought he would go to Lincoln's Inn and hear if there was any real danger that the will would not be upheld, and the partner who saw him was not un-

sympathetic, and as communicative as his profession allowed.

But he did not pretend to take a very encouraging view of the case, for, as he remarked with much weight, if the case went into court, and it was proved that the deceased had, as it was currently reported, devoted much of his later days to fruitless attempts to drill ducks in his back-garden, the fact might not increase the jury's confidence in his testamentary capacity—a view with which poor Campion agreed with a sinking heart.

He could not learn with any certainty when he might expect to know the worst; it appeared that the executors had entered something known as a 'warning to the *caveat*,' and the next move must come from the other side, while some time must pass before the case could be set down for trial. Upon the whole, the cautious solicitor succeeded in impressing Campion with the proper degree of gloom.

If, he reflected on his way back, this legacy were really about to prove a legal mirage, he might find himself in a somewhat embarrassed position, for, under the impression that his former strict economy was now no longer necessary, he had run up some considerable bills of late, at his colourman's and framemaker's.

Then there was Sybil. How would this affect his prospects of success with her father, perhaps even with herself? at all events, it must have the result of postponing the marriage if his own income were no longer assured; for Colonel Elsworth was by no means a rich man.

But Campion resolved to shake off all forebodings. Why should he despair when, at that very time, possibly,

his studio contained canvases that would bring both fame and wealth?

On inspection, however, they satisfied him less now that he had become so much more dependent upon them. How was it that he had never noticed before how low they were in tone, how deficient in colour and breadth of treatment. Was it too late even then to bring them nearer to his conception of what they might be?

He decided to make the attempt, and had a wonderful sense of mastery and increased vision as he went over the old ground with rapid, nervous touches. In three hours he had entirely transformed the 'Xerxes' canvas; now the several groups stood out in telling contrast against a flaming sunset sky, the faces and armour had been more boldly dealt with; the whole picture was suffused with a sombre glow.

He was satisfied at last, and now had courage to write to tell Sybil of the change in his fortunes, and ask her to give him some assurance that her constancy was unshaken. The letter was written in hot haste in his studio, and as he wrote the direction, he happened to look up and caught what seemed a look of bland encouragement and approval on the face of the oriental image on the cabinet opposite.

It was too precious a letter to trust to another hand, and he put it in the letter-box himself, confident of receiving the answer by return of post; he waited the next day, and two days more—but no reply came, though he knew that Sybil and her aunt were still at Sussex Place.

Then he went to the post-office and made inquiries, which he felt at the time were a farce, for he had no real doubt that his letter had been delivered in the usual way; they gave him a form to be filled up and sent to the Postmaster-General, but it occurred to him that Sybil might be troubled by official inquiries which would only vex her whether the letter had been received or not.

So he took the more sensible course of writing again, and his letter was one which no girl with any vestige of a heart could leave unanswered. Bales happened to come into the room shortly afterwards.

'Will you be wanting this yere image for a few minutes,' he inquired, 'because I thought if you had no objections I'd get my missus to give it a wash down. What with the blacks and dust about, it's got so that a little soap and water wouldn't do it no 'arm.'

'Just as you like,' said Campion.

'This for the post, sir?' said Bales, as he was leaving the room with the idol tucked under his arm like a terrier, and saw Campion's letter on the table.

'No—let me see, I was going to the post with it myself; but, very well, Bales, only it must be posted in time for the last collection, mind!'

Bales went out with a kind of resentful grunt at being supposed in need of such a reminder. In about ten minutes the idol reappeared, not a whit cleaner, in the charge of Mrs. Bales.

'Could you oblige Bales with a little brandy, sir?' she asked.

'Certainly, you know where to find it. Isn't he well?'

'He's had a slight fall, sir, and came down rather severe-like on the back of his head. I don't know what's come to Bales lately, he's took so to falling about and 'urting himself.' And later in the day Bales's grim countenance was not improved by a bandage, but he made no reference to his accident.

Had Sybil a heart or had she not? He waited again for some airily tender lines from her, but they never came.

He sent for Bales and questioned him; but Bales was indignant at the mere suggestion of any default on his part. 'Any letters, Mr. Campion, sir, as you give me to post, I post. You gave me that there letter—and posted it was, you may depend upon it.'

After this he decided not to write again; Sybil's silence was evidently intentional. Still, he did not blame or doubt her, she might be prevented, or have promised not to write until she had seen her father.

Campion declined to believe the worst in her case, and tried to concentrate his whole energies upon the 'Sappho' in which he had now produced a wonderful alteration; he was still eagerly at work when the men came with packing cases to carry the two largest canvases to the Academy.

But when they were off his hands he found himself more and more troubled by Sybil's silence.

There were little phrases of hers which he had thought at the time charming in their affectation of impertinence

and indifference. Were they no affectation after all? She never concealed the girlish pleasure she took in making dainty little experiments on his feelings. Was this only heartlessness?

He used to ask himself these questions as he stood before her portrait, and even asked the pictured face as if those lips, smiling so disdainfully, were able to answer him 'Tell me, you are not cruel, not indifferent—you do love me a little?'

The picture was finished, but now he began to feel dissatisfied with it—he had meant to do so much more, and he felt that he had come very far short of rendering the exact shade of expression he thought to have surprised.

And there seemed now a want of balance in the composition, which he could have wished to set right before it was too late; some accessory was needed at the right of the picture to keep the gorgeous hangings from becoming too prominent, and to relieve their somewhat bizarre effect.

It happened that at the instant this occurred to him his eye was resting upon the figure of the idol, and he uttered an exclamation of sudden enlightenment. There was his accessory! Yes, it was the very thing, in sufficient character to harmonise with the surroundings, so quaintly ugly as to accentuate the charm of his subject. It seemed as if some instinct had led Sybil to give it to him for this particular purpose.

And then if she really were drifting apart from him, would she not, when she recognised the addition he had

made to her portrait, see in it a mute appeal—a witness of the link between them? It could not displease, and it might even succeed in touching her.

After this fancy had taken thorough possession of him, not all the best judges in London could have dissuaded him, on the most unanswerable artistic grounds, from carrying it out.

He placed the idol upon the dragon pedestal, and began to paint it experimentally, but he had scarcely done more than indicate its position on the canvas before he became enchanted with his success. He painted on for two days, denying himself to everyone, scarcely allowing himself time for meals, so strongly did his subject appeal to his imagination; and as he went on, he was astonished himself at the brilliancy and accuracy with which he had imitated its dingy tone and grotesque features.

He found himself able too to catch the exact expression in Sybil's eyes and mouth which had haunted and eluded him till then; it was rendered in so marvellous and lifelike a manner that he caught his breath, only half able to believe that his hand had really attained to such added skill.

Picture-Sunday passed, but did not affect him, for, wisely or unwisely, he had never encouraged the society stream to flow through his studio, and it now passed him by in ignorance.

Still he worked on, retouching and improving, with ever-growing delight, until past the regular Grosvenor sending-in day, for, on giving the measurements of the space his picture required, he had been granted a few

days' grace, but at last, one afternoon, he had to allow it to be taken away, and saw it depart with a sense of desertion.

Even then he was not disposed to be idle. He had forgotten Babcock and his landscape all this time, but now, with a feeling that he owed it as a kind of atonement to his departed rival, he painted in a figure from an old sketch-book with all the care he could bestow.

And, a fortnight later, a letter bearing the royal arms was brought to him, containing an official notice which he read with a sick bewilderment.

Two-thirds of his year's labour wasted, a crushing and double failure! Xerxes and Sappho, in which he had been so proudly confident, rejected!

His self-confidence staggered under the shock—where was all the increase of power he had been so conscious of? How could he have deceived himself so blindly, so grossly? If Sybil's portrait had not already left the studio, he would have destroyed it then and there in the first mad rush of despair and disappointment. It was safe at least from rejection, having been sent by express invitation, but for all he knew now it might prove as hideous a failure.

He was still chafing under the bitterness of this rejection, when an Academician called Perceval, who was on the Hanging Committee that year, looked in to see him. Perceval had always been a kind and appreciative friend, who had shown a warm interest in Campion from his student days.

'You've had your medicine, I see, eh?' he said, as he saw the young painter's face.

'Yes!' said Campion with a forced laugh, 'and gulped it down.'

'Well,' Perceval said, 'I did all I could for you, but it was no use—they wouldn't have you at any price.'

'Thanks,' said poor Campion, drearily, 'and—and did you think them so infernally bad?'

'Do you want my candid opinion—don't say "yes" if you mean "no." Very well, then, if you must have it, I couldn't believe my eyes when I read your name on 'em. My dear boy, what could you have been about to send in such screamers, like the pictures outside a shooting saloon, or a peep-show, by Gad they are! I assure you, I consider it a good thing for you they are rejected, you'd have been guyed, sir, if they'd hung you.'

Campion groaned. 'You saw them a couple of months ago, and spoke rather well of them.'

'Well, you've played the very deuce with them since. I scarcely knew 'em again at first. Come, my boy, you must set to and turn over a new leaf unless you want to join the noble army of rocket-sticks. You've got on a wrong track; you're playing to the gallery, and a confounded transpontine kind of gallery at that.'

'I suppose you're right, Perceval. I've been a fool. I've perpetrated a portrait, too, which can't escape the pillory, for it's at the Grosvenor. If the others are bad, I suppose this is even worse, for I thought it was the best thing I'd done.'

'Go round to the Gallery and see if you can't get them to let you have it back. You mustn't play any

tricks with your reputation just yet, my dear fellow; leave that to *us*.'

Campion shrank from this extreme step. 'I can't do that, so much depends on it, I can't trust my own judgment any longer. Perceval, you know them there, you're exhibiting something yourself, aren't you? I'm leaving town to-night—I can't stay here now—will you see the picture if you can, and use your own discretion? If it's bad, use all your influence to get it taken down. I'll give you the fullest authority.'

'Well, I don't suppose they're often asked to do such a thing, and it may be a ticklish business to manage,' said Perceval, 'but I'll try my best. If the portrait (I haven't seen it, so I don't know), but if it's poor work and unworthy of you, I'll worry them till they give it up.'

'They may be glad enough to be let off hanging it,' said Campion gloomily.

'If it's at all like the other two,' Perceval replied, 'I can't say I should be surprised if they were. Can't imagine what's come to you this year!'

'I expect I belong to the order of Jonah's gourds,' said Campion bitterly, 'and produce a gold medal pumpkin, and some biggish leaves—and then wither.'

'Don't talk that nonsense to me. Come, come! cheer up, my boy, you'll pull round all right, never fear. And I'll do what I can about the portrait, and let you know the result, eh?'

Campion thanked him warmly, and gave the address of the little country village where he was going to hide his shamed head for the present, and they parted.

It was with a sore heart that he signed the receipt which was to authorise Bales to take back his unlucky canvases, and then left town, to spare himself the sight of them just then.

Here it may be said that when, some days after his return, he found courage to look at Xerxes and Sappho once more, he was forced to admit the justice of their condemnation. He could hardly believe he had painted them, they were so crude, so barbarically garish in colour, so far below in everything but the conception all that he had ever done, that it seemed as if only some lying spirit could have inspired him with any confidence at all in them.

However, before another week had passed, this telegram came to him at the homely inn where he was staying: 'Have seen pic. Daring very, but far from bad. Think it will do. Hung on line end of East Gallery. Under circs. I let it stay there.'

What relief this pregnant message brought him! he was not such a complete failure, then, after all. Sybil would not have to think him a wretched impostor, and the fate of his Academy failures troubled him no more.

He had intended to remain away from town until after the private view, but now he found courage to return.

CHAPTER V.

EXPLANATIONS.

If thou wilt leave me, do not leave me last,
When other petty griefs have done their spite
But in the onset come; so shall I taste
At first the very worst of fortune's might.—*Sonnets.*

In spite of the fact that his mind was at ease respecting the portrait, Campion was by no means cheerful during his journey to town. In all probability he would meet Sybil at the private view next day, but he could not calculate with any certainty upon the treatment she might see fit to accord him, and he could not help feeling himself in a very anomalous position. She had not written a line to him since he saw her last; he could not even be sure whether he might still consider himself engaged or not. To-morrow her first look would end his doubts—but he rather shrank from thinking how they might be determined.

Consequently it was with a thrill rather of anxiety than pleasure that, after he had stepped out on the Paddington platform, he found himself suddenly almost face to face with Sybil Elsworth.

She was coming towards him without the slightest appearance of recognition. Her eyes were scanning the line

of doors and windows with an air of absorbed inquiry that looked only too like an attempt at evasion. He hesitated, pride urged him to pass on, common sense suggested that he would be a fool if he concluded the worst without more unmistakable proof, and at that instant she saw him, and his suspense was over.

The sudden light in her deep eyes, and the frank welcome in her smile and voice were enough to chase away all his brooding misgivings. No, she had not given him up yet.

'You didn't expect to meet me here?' she said, almost in the same breath with her first greeting.

'No,' he replied, 'I have just come up from Diggleswede, in Worcestershire, and had no reason to hope for this.'

She shot a reproachful glance at him. 'But you were going to pass on at first—you know you were.'

'I wasn't sure what you would wish,' he replied.

'Dear me,' laughed Sybil, perhaps not without a spice of vexation, 'that was very punctilious of you. It would never have occurred to me that duty expected us to cut one another!'

'Not duty exactly,' he explained.

'Then what was it, please?'

'You took no notice of my letters,' he said. 'I couldn't tell how they might have changed you.'

'But I never got them! And so you have been doubting again? Ah, Ronald, I had more faith in *you*!'

'Did you write?'

'No, but only because Aunt Hilary got a promise from

me that I would not be the first to begin. I shouldn't have promised, but I thought you were so certain to write. But you did after all, so it's all right—isn't it strange, though, that I should never get your letters?'

'Sybil,' he said passionately, 'I begin to see—your aunt has taken care that my letters should not reach you. This is her work!'

She was startled. 'Aunt Hilary!' she exclaimed. 'Oh, if I thought that, but it can't be—it isn't like her.'

'I wouldn't think so if I could avoid it. No doubt in keeping back my letters she considered she was doing her duty to you. There, we won't trouble about it, will we? for, after all, her plans have broken down. How did you come to be here alone?'

'I—I forget,' she said, with a happy little laugh. 'Oh, I know, I was sent to meet a Miss Moon, who is coming to stay a few days with Aunt Hilary. I'm not alone. Griffiths is here with the carriage, and if you look you will see our youthful James staring with all his eyes at you and me. But evidently Miss Moon has missed the train, or got into one going the wrong way; she generally makes a few circles, I believe, before she gets on the right track—like a carrier-pigeon. And the question is now—what is to be done next?'

'Wait till the next train,' suggested Campion.

'Doesn't come in till nearly seven,' she said. 'I don't know what Griffiths would do if he was asked to wait for three hours.'

'Couldn't you send the carriage away and wait here—with me?' he suggested desperately.

She shook her head gently. 'Not for three hours, Ronald. And besides, I don't suppose Miss Moon will come to-day now.'

'But she may,' pleaded Campion, 'and she'll expect someone to meet her, poor thing.'

'How kind of you to think of that!' said Sybil mischievously, 'and wouldn't you really mind waiting here all by yourself? Because I could give you her description, and you could meet her and explain things and put her comfortably into a cab, and all that you know.'

'I could do it, of course,' he said uncomfortably, 'if you insisted on it. But, Sybil, I have so much to talk to you about. If you could only stay a little while and listen.'

'You forget that you were not to attempt to see me at all,' she said.

'Our meeting like this was an accident,' he said, 'and in any case, your aunt has not kept faith with me, Sybil. I consider I am released. Those letters contained very important news, and if I am not allowed to tell it to you in any other way, I must speak. Don't send me away.'

'I never said I meant to do that,' she replied, 'but what do you propose?'

'Send back the carriage, and let me see you back to Sussex Place,' he said boldly.

'It would be great fun,' she agreed, 'but what would Aunt Hilary say?'

'She has chosen to suppress my letters after pretending to allow us to correspond; she can't fairly complain of the consequences.

'No,' said Sybil, 'and after all, we have a perfect right to be together, you and I. Yes, you shall take me home.'

The page was told that Miss Moon had not arrived, and that the carriage would go back empty. On the box, driving home, he drew down upon himself a severe snubbing from the coachman for certain comments he had ventured respecting the strangeness of Miss Sybil's last caprice.

'You are a boy, James,' said Griffiths, 'and as sich, it is not your place to pass remarks on your betters. And what's more, if I hear you repeating it in the kitching, James, I shall feel obligated for to fetch you a crump over the head as you won't forget—not partickler soon, James.'

That Griffiths himself preserved an inviolable reticence on the subject is in the highest degree improbable, for the servants of a household find their chief drama and fiction in the sayings and doings of the family, and it would be too much to expect that the entertainment thus provided should escape all criticism.

In the meantime Campion, after disposing of such luggage as he had, was driving with Sybil towards York Gate, from which they intended to walk slowly across the Park.

How delightful that drive with Sybil was! For a time he was content to sit almost silent by her side, and watch her charming animated face and listen to her voice once more.

He had that to tell her which might raise a barrier

between them. He would leave himself, he thought, this one perfect recollection before he spoke; and all too soon they were at Regent's Park and it was over.

It was a lovely spring afternoon, with a balmy warmth in the air. The foliage generally was still sparse, and only the smaller trees had burst into leaf; but here and there the curving chestnut branches ended in a pale knob, and the bare outline of an elm was softened by a delicate mist of green.

They were outside the ring of the Botanic Gardens before Campion told his story of defeat, but having begun, he told it manfully, beginning with his threatened legacy and ending with his Academy reverses.

When he had finished, she laid her hand upon his sleeve with a pretty sympathetic caress. 'And have you been making yourself wretched all this time by thinking I had given you up? I suppose you thought it was only your money I cared about, and that I should reject you because the Academy did. I didn't consult the Academy when I accepted you, Ronald!'

'Ah! but, my darling, it leaves me in a very different position from what I was. I may lose the only thing which justified me in asking you to have me; in any case, I have lost ground as a painter by these two failures. I may never be anything but a poor beggar all my life now.'

'I shan't mind,' said Sybil lightly. 'I'll be a poor beggar too.'

'I'm afraid your father won't hear of that,' he said, 'even if I was selfish enough to ask for it.'

'Then I will wait, Ronald. Oh! I know you think me frivolous and unfeeling, because I do enjoy tormenting you a little, but I do really care for you very much all the time, and you might—you *might* believe in me a little more than you do!'

A great revulsion came over him of intense joy and relief and gratitude, and a little shame, too, that he should again have misjudged her. It found a vent in broken expressions of self-reproach and devotion. 'If you could only know,' he concluded, 'how wretched I have been making myself!'

'All about nothing too,' she observed. 'But you won't be so foolish again, will you?'

His heart swelled with happiness and love, as he saw clearly that, all unworthy as he was, he might henceforth rest secure of her affection. She would never change, unless, which was absurd, he changed first.

And so they walked on by the edge of the lake, where they had met once before, and all around them seemed in harmony with their own happiness. From the little suspension bridge came the lively clatter of feet over its planks, and the merry shouts of the ragged urchins sliding face downwards on its broad supports. Pleasure boats, propelled by various experimental methods, were splashing over the dark olive water, laced by amethyst ripples, and the waterfowl quacked and screamed with the delight of outwitting one another in the hunt for bread.

Under the trees, on the benches a few tired wanderers were sitting, their worn faces less haggard as they felt the influence of the scene, with the birds twittering gaily

above, and the children at play around, while outside the traffic rolled with the soothing rise and fall of a distant sea.

Perhaps the well-to-do and middle-aged are not as appreciative of our parks as they might be. If they were, we should surely find less apathy in providing for the needs of the London of the future in this respect. But the poor and the weary, the children and the lovers know the value of such magic enclosures, where the outside world is left behind at the keeper's lodge.

For lovers especially, not the Forest of Arden could offer greater facilities—except in the trifling detail of cutting names, and on the other hand, your park-keeper is a less fearful wildfowl than your lion.

For Campion, at least, Regent's Park was a paradise on that unforgettable afternoon, and everything in it was eloquent of the long happy summer that was at hand.

'I wonder what Aunt Hilary will say to me when she hears where I have been and with whom!' said Sybil. 'I can manage her now, though; I have found out her plot. I shall be fearfully stern and angry, if I can only keep it up long enough. She really has behaved very badly, and I ought to be in a greater rage than I am. But even yet I can't quite imagine her doing such a thing; it is so unlike her, with all her little peculiarities.'

'I would rather believe, myself, that she had no hand in it,' he agreed. 'But then her getting that promise from you is very suspicious, Sybil. I'm afraid there is only one explanation.'

'I shall soon know,' said Sybil. 'It's disappointing,

because I was beginning to think she was rather ashamed of making such a fuss about our poor dear idol. What is the matter, Ronald?'

For he had uttered a half-suppressed exclamation at the word. All at once he saw the use to which he had lately put the idol in a new and startling light. In his enthusiasm as a lover and a painter he had, strangely enough, perhaps, entirely overlooked the probability that Mrs. Staniland would resent his introduction into Sybil's portrait of the image which had been the instrument of her favourite's decease.

Now he felt that he had been guilty of the rashest folly in thus deliberately re-opening the wound. He could little enough afford to give fresh cause of complaint, and yet in his blindness that was precisely what he had done!

'Nothing,' he replied, to Sybil's last question; 'that is, I was thinking of the portrait at the moment.'

'Oh, Ronald!' she cried, 'is there something worse to be told yet? Is that rejected too?'

He smiled at her naïve anxiety. 'Oh, no,' he said, 'that's all right—in fact, I believe it has one of the best places.'

'How you frightened me; but something is worrying you, I'm sure.'

'I was thinking,' he said slowly, 'that it might be better if you could persuade your aunt not to go to the Grosvernor to-morrow.'

'*Not*, Ronald!' she exclaimed; 'but of course we shall go, when we've tickets and everything! We are going to

lunch early and be there about two. I thought you would be there, and we should meet. Surely you're not afraid she will make a scene; don't you know Aunt Hilary better than that?'

'Well,' he said, with a sigh of resignation, 'it can't be helped, I suppose; you couldn't go alone, of course, and she will see it some time.'

'See what?' asked Sybil; but he continued as if to himself, 'And after all, she may not think anything of it —why should she?'

'I don't know, dear,' said Sybil, 'because, you see, I haven't any idea what you're talking about.'

'It's a trifle,' he said, 'an alteration I made at the last moment. I wish now—but it's no use wishing.'

'Aunt Hilary won't mind, if she even notices,' said Sybil. 'She is not very critical in art matters.'

'It's hardly a question of art. I intended it to touch you, and you only. I begin to think I was a fool to run such a risk.'

'Why do you excite my curiosity in this unfeeling way?' said Sybil. 'Tell me at once.'

'No,' said Campion; 'we will see it together, dearest, to-morrow, and you shall tell me that you at least are not offended by what I have done.'

'I don't like mysteries,' she said, putting up her chin a little resentfully.

'Other people's mysteries? Perhaps not,' he said laughing, 'but I can't give up my little effect. I want it to burst upon you suddenly.'

'But it doesn't amuse me to have effects bursting

suddenly. I like to feel prepared for them. I didn't know you were so obstinate. If you really won't tell me I shall go away. Yes, I mean it, it's getting late, and I dare not stay here any longer. I must go and have it out with my wicked aunt. And, Ronald, things will be so different after to-morrow.'

In a few minutes Sybil was at Sussex Place, and went straight to the drawing-room, where she found her aunt seated by one of the satin-shaded lamps, with her embroidery in her hands. She looked sharply up as her niece entered. 'What does this mean, Sybil?' she demanded.

Sybil was stripping off her gloves, and as she spoke she was removing her hat and smoothing her pretty brown hair before a small mirror. 'It means,' she said, 'oh, it means that Miss Moon never came after all.'

'I know that—she will not come now till next week. I have just had a telegram. What I want you to tell me is why did you send the carriage home empty?'

'It was such a lovely afternoon I thought I would walk.'

'You know very well I don't like you to walk about London alone, Sybil.'

'Ah, but I wasn't alone—Ronald was there.'

'Ronald Campion!' and Mrs. Staniland's tone and look were awful in their horror. 'What, when you both promised?'

Sybil came and looked down at her with a smile of conscious power.

'You're a very wicked and cruel old lady,' she observed,

'and I'm extremely angry with you. You might have spoilt my life, if I hadn't found you out in time!'

Mrs. Staniland put down her work. 'If you expect to carry off your disobedience by being impertinent,' she said imposingly, 'it will not succeed with me. You had no business to meet Mr. Campion without my knowledge —it was disgraceful of both of you.'

'It was quite an accident. Still, you broke *your* word; you said we might write, you know you did.'

'I don't see how that affects the case,' said Mrs. Staniland stiffly.

'It's no use, Aunt Hilary. I know all—about those two letters Ronald wrote to me!'

'What about them?'

'Ah, you know,' cried Sybil, reproachfully. 'I dare say you meant it all for the best, but it was not fair, indeed it wasn't. And so useless, because, whether you and Papa like it or not, I shall never marry anybody else, you know. Now, be a good old lady and say you won't come between us again in that way.'

'I think you have lost your senses,' said Mrs. Staniland. 'You are talking very strangely to me.'

'Then I will speak plainly. Ronald sent me two letters; I never got either. Aunt Hilary, I believe you best know why.'

Mrs. Staniland rose stiffly. 'That will do, Sybil. I never thought a niece of mine would insult me like this. I keep back letters after giving him leave to write! If that is your opinion of me, the less we see of one another in future the better.'

Instinct told Sybil that this indignation was no feint; she clung to her aunt, and detained her by gentle force from leaving the room. 'Forgive me,' she entreated; 'I'm ever so sorry I could think such a thing—I was a wicked wretch to suspect you.'

'I presume,' said the elder lady, as she sat down with a non-committal expression, 'that Mr. Campion was good enough to suggest this?'

'We didn't know what to think—you see, there were two letters; they couldn't both miscarry, could they?'

'Easily—if they were neither of them written,' said Mrs. Staniland.

Sybil started. 'Don't talk like that,' she said; 'he *said* he wrote—why should he deceive me?'

'That I can't tell. I only know that I have neither seen nor heard of his letters. If you want any further assurances——'

'You know I don't,' cried Sybil, and sank down impulsively at her aunt's knees. 'Won't you forgive me now—not when you see how penitent and humble I am?'

Mrs. Staniland was disposed to make the most of her grievance. She turned away her head, and made some inarticulate sounds to convey that she was irreconcilably offended, but she could not resist the vivid upturned face very long, and presently kissed her on the mouth with a tolerably good grace. 'You're a naughty wilful child,' she said, 'and I shall be heartily glad when your father comes home and my responsibility is over.'

Sybil was playing with the lace on her aunt's dress,

'You won't be angry with Ronald for this, will you?' she said.

'I have already told you that, as soon as your father arrives, I shall leave him to deal with this alone. Till then, it's my clear duty to see that it goes no farther.'

'I mean, you won't prejudice Papa against Ronald?' pursued Sybil. 'You discovered him, you know, you dear old darling.'

'As a painter, my dear, hardly as a *parti*. However, if your father is satisfied, I shall not interfere.'

'Ronald told me to-day,' said Sybil, 'that it might be years before we could be married. He has been very unfortunate lately.'

'Ah,' thought Mrs. Staniland, whose experience had rendered her extremely shrewd in going behind appearances. 'So he's trying to get out of it now that he finds I shall do nothing for him! And I suppose, my dear,' she said aloud, 'he offered to release you?'

'He was going to, if he did not in so many words,' said Sybil, 'but of course I wouldn't listen.'

'Are you quite sure you were not intended to listen—and to consent? He knows by this time that your father cannot afford to do much for you.'

'How can you say such things?' cried Sybil, drawing back indignantly, 'you who can be so kind and good when you choose! I won't listen; you can't make me doubt him; only he himself could do that, and he never will. Why are you so bitter against my poor Ronald?'

'When you have lived as long in the world as I have, my dear, you may be as suspicious of everything men say

that sounds disinterested and noble, as I am. But I won't say another word. Mr. Ronald Campion may be everything that is high-minded; I'm sure I hope so for your sake. I suppose he will be at the Grosvenor to-morrow, by the bye?'

'Yes,' said Sybil, 'and I forgot to tell you before, but I am hung very well indeed, he says; isn't that a good thing? And—and if we see him there, don't be stiff and proud to him; be nice, and let him see that at least you don't mean to side against him. I shall keep you here till you promise.'

'I wish you would learn to treat me with more respect, Sybil,' Mrs. Staniland protested, but she could not withdraw her hands from Sybil's warm firm grasp, and she had to give the required assent at last. 'There then, if Mr. Campion behaves himself he shall have no cause to complain of ill-treatment from me; and now go and dress for dinner, you self-willed child, and let me have a little peace.'

And while this conversation was being carried on, Campion was fondly retracing his steps across the park, for the mere pleasure of recalling the happy hour that had just fled; of associating each step with some charming word or look of his lady's, like the lover in 'Garden Fancies.' How lovely she had looked, how sweet and consoling she had been, how he loved her! And the afternoon was gone, and the tender spring twilight was far advanced before he had cooled sufficiently to remember that he ought to be returning to Romanoff Road. He let himself in, not without a passing shiver at the sight of

some packing-cases by the door—his rejected pictures were inside them—and found himself unintentionally assisting at an apparently animated dispute in the painting-room, between Bales and his wife, which was audible from the entrance.

'If you don't tell him, Marire, I shall, that's all!

'You will, will you, carry tales against your own wife? Do then!'

'I've got my dooty to do, and, seein' as I ain't mixed up in it noway, I feel no 'esitation in doin' of it.'

'Let me leave it on master's table, Bales, and say nothink—he won't notice anythink.'

'Won't he, Mrs. Bales?' said Campion, showing himself at the door of the painting-room. 'Why?'

Mrs. Bales put her hand to her side. 'Oh, sir,' she faltered, 'I didn't go for to do it.'

'There's a woman all over,' remarked her devoted husband, 'goes and drops a letter down behind a cabinet, where it might ha' been lost altogether if I hadn't come across it cleaning up.'

'I didn't drop it down neither, so that's how much you know,' retorted Mrs. Bales. 'I went out of my way to be careful, as it so happens, for it came while you was out, and I put it so it would ketch your eye, sir, and to keep the draught from blowing it away, I kep it down with the corner of that Hingian bust there, and that's the truth if I was to die!'

'Say what you like, Marire,' persisted the inexorable Bales, 'you can't get over the fact that I found the letter down behind the cabinet. You can't trust women with no

documents, Mr. Campion, sir; their brains ain't constructed for it.'

'When you've both finished talking,' said Campion, 'I should like to have my letter.'

Mrs. Bales brought it out from underneath her apron. 'I do hope it ain't of any importance, sir.'

Campion took the letter, which was directed to him in a hand that strangely resembled his own; the postmark showed that it had been delivered about a month ago.

It contained the first letter he had written to Sybil after his change of fortune, and for some time he could not understand how this could be, till it occurred to him that, in his haste and excitement, he must have inadvertently written his own name and address on the envelope in mistake for Sybil's. It was foolish, but then a certain percentage of people every year post a letter with no address at all. If he told himself he was incapable of a similar folly, why, there was the envelope to convict him.

So there was the failure of one letter accounted for; was the non-delivery of the other capable of an equally simple explanation? He resolved to question Bales more closely.

'You remember the letter I gave you to post some days ago,' he said; 'did you notice the direction?'

'You give me a many letters to post,' said Bales gruffly; 'was this any partickler one?'

'It was one I gave you when you were taking this thing here downstairs to be washed.'

'Oh,' said Bales, 'the day I fell down the kitching steps, and cut my head open. I remember.'

'Well, you told me afterwards you had posted it, you know.'

'In course I posted it—if I said so.'

'No, Bales,' put in his wife, 'not the day you broke your head against that himage—not *that* day you didn't.'

'What are you cackling about, Marire—how do you know what I did?'

'Because you never stirred out of the house all that day; you mostly laid on a chair and groaned, and swore, you did till I thought Something would come for you.' And Mrs. Bales concluded by declaring her conviction that he had the letter somewhere about him still.

'Oh, you think so, do you?' snarled the insulted man. 'I'm not one of your sort though; there's nothing onreliable about me—you'd like to make out I was no better than yourself, I dare say. Well, you won't do it.'

'You might examine your pockets though, Bales,' suggested Campion.

'Oh, I'll do that cheerful. I ain't afraid—there, you see, nothing in that, is there, sir? Nor in that, Marire? Nor in—well, I needn't go on, *I* should think?'

'No,' said Campion, 'for unless I'm mistaken, there's the letter.'

'What did I tell you?' cried Mrs. Bales.

'I can't account for it, sir,' said the chapfallen Bales, 'except that a trifle of that kind will slip out through a split head, do what you will—there's no call for you to snigger, Marire. If you'd had my excuse, I shouldn't have blamed you.'

Campion dismissed the couple to continue their

bickerings below, without expressing, or indeed feeling, any great annoyance. Now that he and Sybil had met, the fate of his letters had become unimportant.

The second letter was correctly addressed, he found, but had not passed through the post at all. The one thing that troubled him now was the injustice he had done to his benefactress in believing that she had tampered with the correspondence; and although the discovery that he had been mistaken was a relief, as it proved her to be a less bitter and unscrupulous enemy than he had imagined, his conscience reproached him bitterly for his ingratitude —he especially wished that he had not communicated his suspicions to Sybil.

Still, this explanation certainly left him with better grounds for hope than before, and he was too happy just then to give more than a passing thought to his own readiness to judge uncharitably.

He had intended to dine at his club that evening, but after his meeting with Sybil, he did not care to carry that bright memory where it might be dulled or tarnished; he must be alone to enjoy the anticipation of happiness.

And a little later, after an almost untouched dinner, he was wandering under the evening sky, luminous just then with a deep transparent blue in which the first stars were quivering.

Naturally, though he walked far and fast, in his aimless content, the 'spirit in his feet' brought him at last to Sussex Place, where was the casket which contained his jewel. The curtains of all the windows were close drawn, and he could catch no glimpse of any form which

he might persuade himself was Sybil's, but he found a certain satisfaction in looking up at the roof, with its prosaic parapet and chimney-stacks vaguely massed against the star-sown sky; no roof could be quite commonplace which sheltered her, and so, with his heart throbbing with exquisite exaltation, he went home to dream, if he might, of the morrow.

CHAPTER VI.

THE PRIVATE VIEW.

Let not my love be called idolatry,
Nor my beloved as an idol show.

THE hour was at hand to which Campion had been looking forward so impatiently; it was about two in the afternoon when he turned into Old Bond Street from Piccadilly.

Bond Street was looking its best on that Saturday. A sharp brief April shower had given a freshness and brilliancy to the various tints of the house fronts; the varnished roofs of the carriages that congested the thoroughfare glanced and glittered with past rain and present sunlight, and here and there, above the crowded pavements, a striped awning or projecting placard gave touches of vivid colour which were softened into harmony by the pearly haze that melted into the tender azure above.

The West End of London, sombre and gloomy in winter and autumn, hot and glaring in summer, has in spring a picturesqueness, a play of light and colour, an animation of pleasure rather than business, which give its streets an individual and irresistible charm.

The dullest 'Season,' capricious and unaccountable as

that curious social institution is, has not as yet had time to find itself out, and flag untimely. Trade and its patrons are inspired with the lively but vague hopefulness which is as vernal as the almond-blossom itself.

Campion was just in the mood to be peculiarly susceptible to it; all was going well with him. He was on his way to receive a double reward, smiles from his love, congratulations from his friends; no wonder that his heart was light and his step elastic as he entered the Grosvenor portals, and passed up the crimson stairs, where the turnstiles had vanished, and attendants received his ticket in a waste-paper basket.

A searching glance into the two chief rooms told him that those he came to see were not arrived as yet; the place was in possession for the present of a few enthusiasts, who were apparently unaware that they were making an eccentric use of their tickets in looking at the pictures.

But even these did their inspection with the temporary air of people studying a railway advertisement, and kept a furtive watch for acquaintances whom it might be desirable to recognise or be recognised by.

Campion, from the entrance where he stood, could make out the frame of his portrait, which hung, as Perceval had told him, in the best position at the opposite end of the room; how it adapted itself to its surroundings he could not tell, as the glass which protected the canvas caught the light in a way that left the painting invisible.

But it was attracting an attention that, at such a place and time, was flattering to a degree; a small group

was always in front of it, and none passed it by with indifference.

Should he go and assure himself that it did not suffer from its neighbours? for, as has been said, he had not chosen to attend on varnishing day. He still shrank from the inevitable shock of seeing again in cold blood the work of those last impassioned days; he told himself he did not want to hear unenlightened comments, whether in praise or blame. He would see it first at Sybil's side, and from her lips alone he would accept a verdict.

So he turned down into the little room, where he carefully examined a variety of water-colours which he never saw, till his growing restlessness allowed him to stay no longer, but even then it was the West Gallery, where his portrait was not, that he chose by a kind of half-conscious preference.

It was beginning to fill now, though chiefly with professors of art and criticism. Someone touched him on the arm and he saw Perceval, whom he had not seen since the visit after his rejection by the Academy, and whom he thanked now for what he had done about the portrait.

'Nothing to do, as it happened,' said the Academician. 'Been to see it?'

'Not yet,' said Campion.

'Well, you should go,' and Perceval chuckled, ''pon my word, to hear some of the remarks made about it they'd amuse you! By the way, who's your model? Don't know her.'

'It's a portrait,' said Campion. 'She's a young lady, a Miss Elsworth.'

'And do you mean to say she's like that?'

'I'm hardly a judge,' said Campion, laughing; 'but I think it's not bad.'

'Bad—it's devilish clever; but how does the lady like it, eh?'

'She hasn't seen it very lately, but she'll be here presently, and I hope she'll approve.'

'Exactly,' said Perceval, 'and—well, I'm glad you're satisfied with what I did, or rather didn't do. Ah, Mrs. Pontifex, how d'ye do? Soon be a crush now, won't there? I don't know if you've met my young friend, Mr. Campion, before, if not——'

Mrs. Pontifex was a personage in her own set, with the power of conferring social degrees within a certain area. Campion had met her several times at Sussex Place, and she had always treated him with marked graciousness, and asked him more than once to her parties at Bryanston Square. So that he was rather surprised when, with the slightest bow, she said, 'Thank you, I have had that advantage,' and added without looking at him again, 'Mr. Perceval, you're the very man I wanted; do come and unriddle this very bilious and complicated allegory out here; it's quite too much for my unassisted intelligence.'

And she left Campion planted there, wondering a little whether there could be an intention in this capricious coolness. Before he could settle the point to his satisfaction, consolation came in the form of unexpected cordiality from another and equally influential quarter. A little lady, in a sensation costume, wriggled up with an effusion

of delighted recognition. 'It *is* Mr. Campion, I think. So very glad to see you; had the pleasure of meeting you on several occasions at our dear Mrs. Staniland's.'

Campion was not used to this kind of thing, and, coming as it did from Mrs. Venham Honiton, it was still more surprising, for though he had been introduced to her some time ago, she had dropped him systematically ever since, and he had imagined that this was due in some measure to his failure to respond to some sugared little sarcasms of hers, at the expense of his benefactress.

'I've been telling everybody to go and see it,' she said. 'You know what I mean: it really is wonderful, quite wonderful—the portrait of the year. Poor little Miss Elsworth will wake up to find herself famous.'

'You are too kind,' said Campion, unable to resist a pleasure in this unaccustomed flattery.

'What I liked so very much in your picture, was its perfect truth; it was quite refreshing, yes, really, to see someone one knows painted as she actually is in real life. And then that charming idol; I could worship that idol. Only *you* would ever have thought of putting it there.'

'I wanted as strong a contrast as I could find,' he said. 'I'm very glad you approve of the result.'

'How *wicked* you are!' she said, 'you're too clever, Mr. Campion, you'll frighten people away. It's the Black Art you are most familiar with, I believe, or you could never have painted like that. But do come and see me; Cornwall Gardens, you know, and always at home on Sundays. Now don't forget, and come soon.'

And she writhed and fluttered away into the gathering

throng, leaving Campion in a not unpleasant bewilderment. 'By Jove,' he was thinking, 'I must have made a real hit this time, for that woman to be as civil as all that.'

A fresh voice pronounced his name, and looking round he recognised two lady-artists with whom he had worked at the Slade three or four years ago. He learned on inquiry that both were represented in the gallery, but he was implored not to attempt to find their productions. 'For after seeing your portrait,' said the elder, 'we're quite out of conceit with our poor little daubs.'

'And oh, Mr. Campion,' the second struck in, 'we want you to tell us about your mysterious girl. Is she *really* like that?'

'I may not have done her full justice,' he said, 'still I think it is like her?'

'Fancy anyone really being like that,' they cried; 'do you think she knows it?'

'I should say as little as is possible for anyone of her personal appearance.'

'And that's why she sat to you, I suppose? I shouldn't wonder if she was secretly very conceited.'

'I'm not in a position to say,' he answered coldly, 'but the sittings were given at her aunt's request, not from any wish of her own.'

'She might have refused. *I* should,' remarked the elder, 'but it's an ill-wind—— That portrait is going to make your name, Mr. Campion, I prophesy it.'

He found himself unable to follow the sequence of this last remark, and marvelled internally why girls, especially

nice girls like these, could not afford to be more generous to their own sex.

They had turned to speak to someone else, and as Sybil and her aunt might come in at any moment, he was making for the East Gallery, when he ran against Lionel Babcock.

Babcock looked at him with a very curious expression. A mixture of surprise, resentment, disgust, and satisfaction was represented on his usually inexpressive countenance.

'Well, Campion,' he said, 'you've done it this time. And now I suppose you've come here to gloat over your performance?'

'Kind of thing you *would* suppose, Babcock,' said Campion shortly.

'Well, you've made Sybil Elsworth the talk of London —the poor girl won't be able to show her face this season. I should like to know what put such an infernal idea into your head!'

'Look here,' said Campion, 'what do you mean?'

'What did *you* mean? Confound it, Campion, a portrait painter is in a position of trust; it's a low ungentlemanly thing to deliberately betray it, as you've done!'

'You are talking of what you know nothing about,' said Campion, flushing angrily; 'have the goodness to leave that to those concerned, if they are satisfied.' He thought Babcock was taking upon himself to condemn his clandestine engagement, but he was soon undeceived.

'You've taken a fine way to satisfy them,' Babcock interrupted with a sneer, 'but perhaps you'll tell me you

expect poor little Sybil will like the way in which you've thought proper to send her down to posterity.'

Cold misgivings were stealing like serpents over Campion. 'Babcock,' he said, 'what is wrong about the portrait?'

'You won't make that sham innocence go down with anybody, you know,' was all the answer he gained.

'By heaven,' said Campion under his breath, 'you *shall* give me an answer!'

'You'll find the answer in the next room,' said Babcock; 'beg to refer you to No. 999 in the Catalogue.'

'Babcock, I will have this out of you, and know how to deal with it. Come with me now and show me fairly what you object to in the portrait.'

Babcock shrugged his shoulders. 'Of course if you persist in keeping this farce up,' he said, 'I don't mind; only don't imagine I'm taken in by it—that's all;' and he began to move towards the adjoining room followed by Campion.

Slowly, for the rooms were now filling fast, they made their way to the spot where the portrait was hanging, Campion consumed with a dread of he knew not what, as he began to recall the sinister form which the compliments so recently paid him had taken.

The portrait had not ceased to attract remark even yet; there was still a group before it and, strive as he would, Campion could not get near enough to see his work. The crowd blocked his way with a nightmare-like persistency, and all he could see between and over their heads was the sheet of glass reflecting the universal com-

placent smile, as at the appreciation of humour which would be thrown away upon ordinary intelligences.

How he longed, in the mad impatience of that moment, to plunge into the midst, and fight his way to the front, as if he were in a football scrimmage or at the pit doors of a popular theatre. But this was clearly not to be thought of, and he had to fret outside in a smouldering rage; listen to the comments around him, and wonder how long this slow torture would endure.

The comments only inflamed his anxiety. 'Brilliant piece of painting, isn't it?' one would say, and a female voice would reply, 'But so exceedingly *peculiar*; you're not going to tell me you positively like it? I call it quite hideous!' 'That's not the fault of the artist; you can see he has been absolutely truthful and sincere; and then, what masterly drawing!' 'Yes, look at those hands.' 'And the colour, the *brio*, the consummate *verve* and audacity of the treatment; splendid, really splendid . . . work of undoubted genius.' 'Now, *did* you ever see anything so odd in all your life?' 'Isn't it wonderful? —but one expects this sort of thing here!'

But at last he gradually succeeded to a foremost place, and the first glance at his work was distinctly reassuring, though even then the tantalising reflections prevented him from seeing it as a whole. What he saw seemed richer in colour and finer in its surmounted difficulty than he had dared to expect. Where was the flaw Babcock pretended to see? Let him point it out if he could; let amateur critics cant and cavil as they chose, his work

was strong enough to outlast all that—yes, he had been alarming himself unnecessarily.

He was stepping back until he had reached the proper point of view, and then all at once his soaring confidence dropped headlong like a shot bird, as he saw the face of the portrait for the first time since it had left his studio.

Was he mad or dreaming, or *what* was this horrible thing that had happened to it? The bewitching face on which he had bestowed such loving labour, he now saw distorted as by the mirror of some malicious demon, yet without losing a dreadful resemblance to the original. Gradually he realised how subtle and insidious those alterations were, how the creamy warm hue of the cheeks with the faint carmine tinge had faded into a uniform dull white, and the delicately accented eyebrows which, combined with the slightly Oriental setting of the eyes, had given such piquancy to Sybil's expression, were inclined at an ultra-Chinese angle, while the wide, innocent-guileful eyes were narrowed now and glittering with a shallow shrewdness. Worst of all, the smile with its sweet pretence of mutinous mockery, had spread into a terrible simper, self-occupied, artificial, and fatuous.

No longer did the idol on his canvas serve to mark a contrast—it challenged a comparison, and alas! not unsuccessfully, for in appearance it was distinctly the more pleasing of the two. Its former ugliness had been skilfully toned down, its flat features rendered less uncouth, its complexion transparently pure, and its expression one of calm dignity, and profound, but unostentatious, benevolence.

They made a grotesque pair, and the resemblance of this strange-looking girl to the quaint carved thing at her elbow seemed to have been worked out in a spirit of brutal cynicism, which found a repulsive pleasure in insisting upon so ludicrous and degrading an analogy.

Who could have worked this devilish transformation? Not he. He would resist the very thought—yet who else?

Babcock had been watching his face curiously, and saw it twitch and look grey and old in a moment. 'Didn't know you'd gone quite so far, eh?' he said. 'Are you going to ask my reasons for considering that portrait a cowardly insult?'

'No,' said Campion. 'It is, but it's not my work, Babcock; it's been tampered with by some scoundrel.'

'No doubt,' said Babcock drily. 'Very probable indeed!'

'He shall answer for it when I find him.'

'Oh, you'll find him all right,' said Babcock; 'and he'll say anything you like to make him.'

'You think I'm lying,' groaned poor Campion.

'I think you've trusted too much to your nerve. You see it isn't quite such a funny notion as you thought it would turn out. I suppose it was meant to be a little surprise for the fair Sybil——Well, now's your time! There's Mrs. Staniland over there in the next room, and Sybil with her!'

'What am I to do?' cried Campion to himself.

'If you ask me—I say, "Bolt!" You'll only have a scene if you stay. I'll explain things for you.'

'Run away?' said Campion. 'Leave her to see that

thing alone? No, I'll stay here. She will never believe I could be such an infernal villain.'

'No,' said Babcock; 'but you'll admit the other fellow has caught your style very cleverly. Whoever he is, he knows how to paint.'

The same thing had struck Campion, who found it impossible to detect any clear traces of his enemy's handiwork, or to repudiate a single touch on technical grounds, and, much as he tried to reassure himself, he advanced to meet Mrs. Staniland and Sybil with a leaden despondency.

Mrs. Staniland failed to notice him for some time—engaged as she was in a leisurely survey of people who looked so like celebrities that they were probably nothing of the kind, but at the first sight of his agitated face, she laughed, not by any means unpleased.

'Why, bless me!' she said. 'What are you looking like that for? I'd no idea I was so alarming. Come! if I was a little bit ruffled when we last met, you ought to know better than to take all I said literally. There, we'll bear one another no malice, and now you can go and talk to Sybil. Well, Lionel, and how are *you*?'

Sybil was standing near, looking radiantly lovely in the pretty spring costume which set off her slender, supple figure to such advantage. 'Now you know where you must take me first,' she said joyously, and then the sparkle in her eyes made a last expiring leap.

'I can guess,' he said thickly. How was he to prepare her?

He stood before her downcast and troubled. Some-

thing seemed to have removed them immeasurably apart, and Sybil felt that her lover had never appeared to such disadvantage.

There was a scarcely perceptible change in her manner as she said, 'If my portrait isn't here after all, why not tell me, Ronald?'

'It is hung,' he said, his lips catching against one another as he spoke; 'only——' and he paused hopelessly.

Babcock intervened here with an air of graceful consideration. 'The truth is,' he explained, 'I've been telling Campion that he really ought not to allow you to see the portrait in its present state. Believe me, my dear child, it is better not.'

'I should prefer to have a reason, please,' said Sybil.

'What is this all about—not see the portrait!' exclaimed Mrs. Staniland, 'and pray, why are we to be the only exceptions?'

'There have been alterations,' said Campion.

'So you told me yesterday,' said Sybil. 'But you said they would be a surprise for me.'

'Which,' Babcock observed softly, 'I should hardly call an over-statement.'

'Stuff and nonsense!' said the old lady. 'If the portrait is good enough to be exhibited at all, I can't see why we shouldn't be allowed to look at it. And Mrs. Honiton said it was admirable. So if you won't come with us, Sybil and I must go alone, that's all.'

'Let us go, Sybil,' said Campion desperately; and he led the way with her to the fatal spot.

'If I were not perfectly certain I shall have nothing to do but admire,' said Sybil, 'I should not come, but indeed it's too absurd of you, Ronald, to lose confidence in yourself and in me like this.'

'Do you think so?' he said. 'Wait.'

Her pride was wounded by this strange response. What had altered him from the buoyant and ardent Ronald of only yesterday? Could this be the moment she had looked forward to so confidently?

The assembly, conscious of superior attractions in themselves, had turned their backs by common consent upon the pictures, and now, as Sybil and Campion passed into the East Gallery, there was a look on several faces of startled, incredulous recognition.

Many knew Campion by sight, and there were whispers that he was accompanied by the original of his strange portrait. There was a likeness, indeed, but this girl was natural and sweet, and altogether charming. No man with eyes could have misrepresented her by that piece of smirking affectation.

However, she was coming straight to the portrait. This was really interesting—dramatic, even—and the rules of ordinary good-breeding being suspended at these gatherings, Sybil and Campion found themselves surrounded by persons who took an eager interest in their proceedings.

She either was or seemed unaware of this. She stood for some moments before the cruelly elaborate caricature of herself, and Campion at her side could almost hear the blood surging up into his brain.

At last she turned. Her eyes were misted over as if with pain, and her face was a shade paler, but she smiled, and he alone read the proud contempt in the curve of her lips.

'It is not—not quite what I expected to see,' she said; 'but it is very clever, and a complete surprise. It would not have been at all right to prevent me from seeing it.'

Then she turned from him to Babcock, who had come up with Mrs. Staniland in the meantime. 'And now,' she said, 'suppose we go and see something else; perhaps you can find me a seat in the next room, and tell me who everybody is.'

They moved away, Babcock nothing loth, and were followed a little way by some whose curiosity was still unslaked, and who would have followed farther but for the entrance of a renowned beauty, with superior claims to their attention.

Campion was left behind with Mrs. Staniland, who was sternly taking in every unfortunate detail of her niece's portrait, with pursed lips, and an occasional 'Humph!' of indignant disgust. 'Well, sir,' she said at last, 'have you anything to say for yourself?'

'Only,' he said, 'that I have no idea how it comes to look like that!'

'And this horrible image—what made you put that in. Was it to gratify me?'

'It was a mistake,' he said. 'I never thought till too late.'

'No gentleman makes such a mistake as that. To

insult me by the very skill, which, without my help, you would never have attained. Even I have never met with quite such black ingratitude before. Well, this is not the place to tell you my opinion of you; the only charitable excuse for your conduct is insanity. And now I'll leave you to enjoy your victory. No, be good enough to stay where you are, I am quite able to find my way back alone.'

She turned away. He saw her pause and put up her glasses in search of Sybil, and then the crowd closed on her, and he was alone.

He stood staring blankly at his picture, straining his eyes for some evidence of an alien hand, with a dreadful haunting fear that if he looked long he would be compelled to recognise it all as his, yet unable to tear himself away.

Behind him the 'Private View' was at its height; the gallery was completely blocked by people whose eagerness to have the earliest sight of the year's Art seemed to have defeated itself: for they were reduced, though they bore it with resignation, to inspecting and criticising one another, and the hum and chatter of talk had the feverish hurried rhythm of machinery.

All the elements of this singular privacy were assembled now: celebrities of all ranks and professions dispensing their graduated greetings; fashionable beauties, consciously unconscious of neighbouring round eyes; the *poseurs*, and the seekers after paradoxes, and the background of nonentities—the 'Adelphi guests'—so to speak, at this stage banquet of Art, who looked on with a sense of

reflected distinction in direct proportion to the number of faces they recognised from photographs.

Those whose social footing was less secure than they could wish might be known by their restless endeavours to catch or avoid a distant eye, and the pre-occupied character of their conversation, which suggested a 'dog and shadow' conviction that there was an acquaintance somewhere in the room with whom it might be even more desirable to be seen. Campion stood apart from it all, unregarding and unregarded; he scarcely knew why he remained at all—except that he shrank as yet from going home, and had no reason for going anywhere else in particular.

But at last he came to himself at the recollection that if he let Sybil leave the place now without an explanation it might be long before an opportunity came again; he was desperate at the mere idea, and determined to delay no longer. He would go into the adjoining room, watch his chance, and assure her of his innocence.

Before he could put this into action, he saw Babcock coming towards him: 'You can tell me,' he said. 'I—I suppose they are still here.'

'Just put them into their carriage,' said Babcock cheerfully: and as Campion groaned, he added: 'You see, you didn't exactly encourage them to stay. But I mustn't forget—I have a message for you from the fair Sybil. She wishes to see you at the house as soon as you can make it convenient to call—at once if you like, for they've driven straight home.'

'She *will* see me then!' cried Campion involuntarily. 'God bless her—there's a chance for me yet!'

'If you can hit upon an explanation that can hold water, I dare say there is.'

'All I know is, that since that portrait left me some scoundrel has managed to ruin it.'

'Through the glass, eh? Look here, Campion, that won't do. I've just been talking to Copal about it—he's one of the hangers here, you know—and he says he particularly noticed it when it was brought in, and it certainly hasn't altered since. Besides, it couldn't be done. Take my advice, find a more probable lie than that, or keep away from Sussex Place.'

'I'm not trying to convince *you*, Babcock,' said Campion.

'You'll only waste your time in trying to convince anyone of that, especially Miss Sybil, who, let me tell you, can come down precious heavily on a fellow when she chooses. I know her pretty well.'

'And I am engaged to her, Babcock.'

'I doubt it—but take your own course; it's nothing to me if you like to cut your own throat.'

In reality Babcock would have preferred that Campion should not see Sybil just yet, but in any case he felt tolerably tranquil as to the course she would take, and his indifference was not so very much overdone.

Campion had not waited to hear the end of this last remark; in another minute he was driving to Regent's Park as fast as a smart hansom could take him.

He was sanguine at first; he was to be allowed to

appeal to her—why should he despair? When she had once heard him, she could not believe him capable of such mad and motiveless cruelty.

But somehow, by the time the cupola-topped corner of Sussex Place was in sight, he felt his courage and hope failing him; and the cab stopped, all too soon, at the house in which he would have to explain what he himself was at a loss to understand.

CHAPTER VII.

A PAINFUL INTERVIEW.

Why didst thou promise such a beauteous day,
And make me travel forth without my cloak
To let base clouds o'ertake me in my way?—*Sonnets.*

CAMPION was shown into the pleasant morning room, bright with daffodils and narcissus, where—as he had earnestly hoped—he found Sybil alone. She was standing by the mantelpiece, and he thought she had been crying, though her eyes were dry as they rested on him for an instant.

He had meant to go to her side at once, but something in her glance checked him, and he stood near the door waiting for her to speak. At last she said, in a rather muffled voice, and without looking at him, 'You might have warned me!'

'Of what?' he said.

'That I was—like that.'

'But—good heavens! you are *not* like that. How can you think so?'

She gave a dreary little smile: 'Of course I don't think so, really. I know I'm not so hideous as that—you

thought so yourself once—but if I'm not, what made you paint me so?'

'I never did paint you so,' he said eagerly.

'Can you prove it?' she said, and her face seemed to lighten with sudden hope. 'Oh! if you can only show me I am wrong—that it couldn't possibly have been you——'

He knew too well—the unhappy man—that such evidence as could be had would probably be unfavourable. He dared not appeal to proof.

'Sybil,' he said brokenly, 'at present—I can't. I may never be able to prove that. I have only my word—but is not that enough?'

'No,' she said; 'not now—not after yesterday.'

'What did I say yesterday,' he said, 'that could make it difficult for you to believe me now.'

'Didn't you try to avoid me at the station?' she asked. 'I couldn't understand it then: it seems quite natural now. And you passed it off with some story of letters I hadn't answered; you accused poor Aunt Hilary of intercepting them! And then—then you did your best to frighten me by telling me how bad your prospects were. You must have wanted me to break off our engagement. I was very blind—wasn't I?—not to understand. I would insist on saying the wrong thing! Then you began to reproach yourself. I think you were beginning to be the least bit sorry, when it was too late, and you tried to persuade me not to go to the Grosvenor this afternoon—but—ah, you wouldn't tell me why, even then!'

His head began to wheel; what fatality was this which

turned his most innocent speeches into damaging admissions?

'I know, I know,' he cried, 'appearances may be against me—but, oh! Sybil, never mind them, put them all aside and trust me. Ask yourself what possible motive I could have had in treating you so!'

'Motive? Perhaps,' she said, 'you may have thought I was getting too conceited, and needed a sharp lesson in public; or else you were offended that last time in the studio, because I was not so pleased with my portrait as you thought I ought to be, and so you determined to give me some real cause to complain; or was it that you did believe I had grown tired of you, and this was your revenge?'

'My God!' he groaned between his teeth. 'Is that what you think of me?'

'What else am I to think? Is there anyone but you, clever enough to paint like that, who could or would have done such a thing? Ah, Ronald, don't persist in denying it. I can bear anything but that. I know you get gloomy fits sometimes, when you feel doubtful of everything and everybody: tell me you did it in one of these, that you never meant to go so far when you began. Only be open with me; nothing else will be of the slightest use. I would try to make allowances for you, but you won't let me. Surely I am making it easy for you!'

'Easy!' he cried. 'I might have done many things in one of my black moods—but that, never! Why, even when I lost heart most, I can't charge myself with a single disloyal or harsh thought of you, Sybil; ah, you don't

believe me! Is there no way of making you feel I am speaking the truth?'

She was looking at him wistfully, only longing herself to be convinced, but the facts were too strong; that portrait—only one hand could have given those touches, the hand of one who knew her face well enough to misrepresent it so subtly, and there was his self-reproach yesterday, his manner at the Grosvenor that afternoon. If he was innocent he could surely hold out hopes of proving it—he did not even do that—no, it was too much to believe; she checked herself in the half-movement she had made towards him.

'It's no use,' she said. 'I can't—I can't. Why won't you say what I ask you?'

'Why? Because it wouldn't be true. Sybil, must this miserable portrait come between us?'

'You talk as if *I* had painted it!' she cried indignantly. 'Is it for you to make little of it like that? Oh, Ronald, I wouldn't have cared *how* ugly you had made me look—at least I shouldn't have cared in this way—if I could only think you had done it honestly, or mistakenly, or from anything but a kind of mean spitefulness. Can't you see that unless this is cleared up—and you *know* you can clear it up if you choose—we can never be the same to one another again? So long as you go on protesting your innocence I can't listen. I know you did it, and nothing you can say to the contrary will ever change me! For the last time, won't you admit that you have treated me unkindly—unworthily? Is that so much to ask?'

'In the sense you mean, too much,' he replied.

'Then I have done,' she said. 'I gave you every chance; I would have done my best to forgive you, however hard I found it; but you refuse even to admit yourself in the wrong. You prefer everything to come to an end between us, and perhaps it is best.'

'If you can misunderstand me so cruelly,' he said, 'I suppose it must end here.'

He walked to the window and looked out, as through a mist, over the enclosed paths and urns and flowerbeds, to the Park palings across the road, with the sparkling lake and rolling green slopes beyond. He knew that this time the breach was serious between them. When she could believe such things of him, in spite of his earnest assurances that they were false—then it was time to part; and yet the unhappy man had never loved her half so much as now, when for a moment her affection had got the better of her wounded pride, and she had offered him forgiveness, if he would only stoop to take it. Unhappily that was just what he could not do. It was a hopeless business—they must part.

'Yes, it must end,' said Sybil. 'Please go now. I cannot bear much more.'

'And to think how happy I was yesterday about this time!' he said. 'Yesterday? Two hours ago—I was happy then—— And now?'

'That is enough,' said Sybil. She was drawing off a ring from her finger. 'You must take this back,' she continued, holding it out to him. 'Yes, I wish it, and there are other things to be sent to you. And my letters if—if they are not burnt, you will return them?'

'To-night,' he said, 'with your present—the idol you gave me once.'

'I don't want it,' she said. 'I want you to keep it. You promised to keep it always. Don't part with it now—it is the last thing I shall ask of you. If you see it now and then, and it reminds you of this—— I don't think you deserve to forget it too soon——'

'I shall want no reminder,' he said. 'But I won't part with it, if that is your wish. And now—good-bye, Sybil.'

'Good-bye,' she said, almost inaudibly. She was still by the chimney-piece, looking at him with such piteous, proud eyes, her head slightly inclined, her mouth taking a pained downward droop, and that was the last he saw of her.

Henceforth the whole world would be disenchanted for him. He felt like a child coming out from an afternoon pantomime into the foggy, greasy streets, with the commonplace of home in prospect, where fairy principles are impossible.

As he went out the page gave him a sealed envelope, which, being in no mood to read letters just then, he put unread in his pocket as he strode across the Park.

Sybil heard the door close upon him; her heart seemed to shut at the same moment, as she stood for some time stunned by the new loneliness which had come upon her. How could he have done it? What had she done that he could humiliate her like that? And then to persist that he was innocent!

Was wounded vanity responsible for some part of her resentment? It would be strange if it were not; she had

felt the natural pleasure of a pretty girl in having her portrait painted, had even indulged certain harmless anticipations of triumph, and all this had been rudely shattered. The picture was cruelly like her, charged with the bitterest mockery, the keenest caricature; for months to come she would grow hot at the sudden, often-recurring thought that it was there in the gallery, and people were smiling at it; that anyone who spoke to her had seen it, and was tracing the resemblance. It was all very paltry, no doubt, but she could not help it.

And, to do Sybil justice, the real bitterness for her lay in the fact that it was her lover who had done all this; and had done it from some quite unworthy motive which he was ashamed to justify or even confess.

Still, as she thought of it—of the bitter contrast between the present and the dreamy tender past of only a few hours ago, she broke down and stole hurriedly to her room, where she locked herself in, to give full vent once for all to the grief that threatened to overpower her.

But when the fit was past, her spirit came to her help; no one, not even Mrs. Staniland, should discover how sorely she had been stricken; and so at dinner that evening she made pathetically brave attempts to talk and behave to her aunt as usual—which, however, did not greatly deceive that quick-sighted old lady.

'Pretends she doesn't care already,' she said to herself. 'Well, well, she won't have to pretend long.'

Campion, whom we left entering the Park, retraced—just as he had done the day before—the route Sybil and he had taken together; but this time, from that obscure

impulse of self-torture which makes some men go out of their way to intensify their misery.

He found a ghastly satisfaction in standing under the same trees; he waited some time for an opportunity of sitting on the same seat, as on the preceding afternoon.

There was the swan Sybil had laughed at yesterday, the stately bird whose dignity forbade him to hurry after crumbs, and who in consequence was perpetually being outmanœuvred by the more active and less particular ducks. He was unchanged, with the same vicious snaps when his triumphant rivals came within reach, the same croaking commentary of blended complaint and satisfaction.

Brutal persons who have never loved will probably observe that there was nothing extraordinary in this; seeing that Nature, animate and inanimate, is rather in the habit of—to use a familiar phrase—'carrying on business as usual during the alterations' in the affairs of most individuals.

But a lover, as may often have been remarked, never quite gets over the impression of the unfeelingness of things in not responding to his darker moods. He can forgive Nature for declining to dance to his piping, but she is unpardonable when he mourns unto her, and she shows no indication of echoing his lament.

Campion did not return home until he had exhausted the fund of bitter-sweet memories; but, like Sybil, he might have been more miserable if he had felt less ill-used. And as he turned towards St. John's Wood and Romanoff Road, he was already setting himself to find

some means of tracing the deed to its cowardly author, and resolving to spend the next day, if he could obtain permission, in restoring the portrait to its original state.

He did not remember Mrs. Staniland's letter until he was at home, and then he opened it with an uneasy curiosity; from a lady of her benevolence it was slightly vindictive in its sentiments.

'In case,' she wrote, 'you are thinking of destroying all traces of your ill-deed before the Gallery is open to the public, I write to inform you that I shall permit no such thing. The picture is mine, and I forbid you to touch it or interfere with it in any way; and if you have a spark of gentlemanly feeling left in you, you will respect my wishes whether you are strictly bound to or not. I understand that the portrait could not in any case be removed without a royal order, but however this is, it is my wish that it remains where it is. It is too absurdly unlike my niece to injure her, whilst the insult to myself, when explained, may serve to show the danger of entrusting you with similar commissions, and the ingratitude which is ever the portion of those who try to serve others. I enclose a cheque: though I should be quite justified in throwing the portrait on your hands after what you have done.'

As will be observed, the fact which had chiefly impressed Mrs. Staniland was the wanton introduction of that fatal idol: the misrepresentation of Sybil was a minor offence in comparison, though she was not sorry that her niece should think otherwise.

Campion cursed his ill-luck as he read this prohibition,

and tore the cheque which accompanied it into pieces. His hands were to be tied, then, and he was more angry on Sybil's account than his own. And all this had been caused by some hidden enemy, who must have a grudge against him—whom had he offended lately? As the author of 'Friends in Council' says, one should ask oneself in such a connection what one has *said*, rather than what one has done; but Campion, though he had a rough tongue at times, did not seek the origin there. The only man at all likely, he considered, to have a grudge against him was Lionel Babcock, whom he had outstripped in Sybil's favour.

And with a flash the conviction seized him that Babcock had done this thing in revenge upon them both. The more he thought over it the more irresistible it seemed, and his heart was swelling with rage when Bales announced the very man who had kindled it.

Babcock came in with an air of conscious moral superiority: 'There was something I meant to say to you when we met this afternoon,' he began.

'There's something I mean to say to you now,' said Campion savagely. 'Sit down.'

'Come now,' said Babcock, with irritating calm, 'there's no occasion to glare at me—I'm not going to reproach you—far be it from me to——'

'You reproach me—do you know what I'm beginning to believe, Babcock?'

Babcock put on his glasses. 'No,' he said, 'but I hope it's a faith with some comfort in it.'

'I believe you're at the bottom of this business.'

'Sorry for you, I'm sure. How long have you felt like that?'

'I'm not in a mood to stand any tomfoolery,' said Campion. 'If you've played me this dastardly trick——'

'No melodrama, please,' protested Babcock languidly. 'In plain words, what's it all about?'

'In plain words, you are the man who altered that—that—portrait.'

Babcock took a long breath. 'So that's your game, is it? I am the man, by Jove! Well, you're a cool hand, Campion. And when am I supposed to have performed this trifling feat?'

'I don't know, but I will find out, Babcock.'

Babcock laughed in a gentle, indulgent manner: 'You should have made inquiries before you selected your scapegoat,' he said. 'Portrait painting's so very much my strong point, isn't it? Why, confound your impudence, don't you know I ran over to Paris the day after you told me of your'—[here he grinned]—'your engagement. I only returned this week—now, then!'

Campion's theory fell in ruins; clearly Babcock was not the man—but who was?

'Babcock,' he said awkwardly, 'I'm very sorry. I was too hasty, you must make allowances—this has upset me a good deal. I hardly know what I'm doing.'

'Oh! I fancy you have a very fair idea,' said Babcock. 'You didn't do so badly. Lucky for me I had an *alibi*, or by Jove, you might have got some to believe you! It's almost beyond a joke, but, as you say, I can make allowances for a man in your desperate case. Well, you've

said your say, and very instructive it was—now I'll have mine. Some time ago, I left a landscape, a rather important piece of work, for you to put a figure in. After what has passed, it occurred to me that on the whole I'd rather have it back, whether you've touched it or not. So I've come for it.'

'I see,' said Campion; 'you think I'm capable of doing it a mischief?'

'Well,' said Babcock, 'you might have an accident with it, you know—you seem to be unfortunate.'

'Oh, as it happens, I've done what you asked me to do! I took some pains with it; you'll find it somewhere about the studio if you like to go down.'

Babcock seemed a little embarrassed. He was disappointed at finding himself under any obligation. 'Oh, I'm sure I'm deeply obliged. Don't you move, I'll fetch it.' And he disappeared in the direction of the painting room.

Presently he returned with the picture. 'Upon my soul, Campion, I did not expect this,' he said with strong feeling.

'Not at all,' said Campion. 'You needn't trouble to thank me.'

'Thank you!' said Babcock exploding. 'What the devil do you mean by this kind of thing? First that poor little girl, and then me. What have we done, eh, to be served like this?'

'You asked me to put a figure in the foreground—well, I have, what more do you want, what's wrong?' said Campion fiercely.

'I brought you a thoroughly English scene, Campion.

I told you I wanted some picturesque and appropriate foreground object. Now, a half-naked nigger may be picturesque, but I'll be shot if it's appropriate——'

'As I painted an old hedger, I don't exactly see——' began Campion, when Babcock thrust the painted side of the canvas under his eyes.

There, squatting in the air in the exact centre of the picture was the figure, disproportionately large, of a coffee-coloured individual with a close-shaven head and half-shut eyes, a string of beads round his gaunt neck, and a scanty garment of bright yellow hanging over one sharp shoulder.

'That your idea of a hedger?' said the enraged Babcock. 'It's a dirty Indian, sir, a fakeer! When did you ever see anything nearer that than a nigger minstrel in Epping Forest, I should like to know? And now, perhaps you'll have the goodness to explain the point.'

'Babcock,' he said at last, 'I know what you must think; I admit it looks very bad. But I never intended to paint a Hindoo. I never had a native model. I don't know how it came there.'

'Then I will help you,' retorted Babcock. 'Look here, Campion, you've always been fond of the dry, sarcastic style of jokes; you've indulged me with it lots of times; you thought I didn't see them, but I did. Now you've come out as a practical joker, and you've gone just a step too far. It might be safe to go and pillory a poor little girl who sat for her portrait, but to ruin a man's picture who trusted in you to give him a lift is a game you may lose at. Outsiders will think it has an ugly look. There is such a thing as professional jealousy!'

Campion laughed a little contemptuously. 'Rather farfetched that, Babcock?'

'Is it, though? Do you suppose any dealer will give me twopence for it, or exhibit it as it stands? If I try to tinker it up I shall spoil it, to a certainty. And that was the best thing I'd done—I shall never catch the same effect again—as you knew!'

'Come,' said Campion, 'I can't account for it, but there's no harm done after all, I can put it right for you in no time.'

Babcock halted between the wish to save his picture, which he did not feel able to do without risk himself, and the dawning prospect of gaining a crushing victory over his rival.

'Ah!' he said unpleasantly. 'So you're beginning to be ashamed of yourself, and want the thing hushed up.'

'Nothing of the sort,' said Campion haughtily. 'If I have done anything at all it was without the slightest intention. In my sleep, perhaps some kind of unconscious cerebration—I can't say; but at least, I have done nothing to be ashamed of. You can believe me or not, of course, and accept my offer or leave it, as you please.'

'I can't stand humbug. You've got a nasty temper, and it's broken out in this form,' said Babcock. 'Drop this rubbish about "not intending" and "unconsciousness," and all that! Own you've done a shabby thing and are sorry for it, and I don't want to make a fuss—you can alter the picture if you choose. I'll hold my tongue about it.'

'I've admitted all I have to admit. I shall certainly not apologise when I don't feel guilty.'

'Very well, then, I take the picture away as it is. If anyone asks me how it comes to have this glaringly idiotic appearance I can only tell them; and if they don't think you show very well in the matter that's not my fault. And Mrs. Staniland and her niece will be coming to me before long.'

Campion turned white. Must Sybil be taught to believe him guilty of a second infamy even meaner than the first? Well, he was powerless, he knew that morally he was innocent, and he would not be so untrue to himself as to imply the contrary.

'I can't help it, Babcock,' he said; 'say and think and do just whatever you please.'

Babcock took up his canvas and went to the door 'You're a pig-headed fellow, Campion,' he said; 'I'd have let you down easier than some fellows would, but I won't stand this posing as an innocent martyr. It's simply sickening. I warn you I shall make no secret of this—to anyone.'

Campion made no answer, and Babcock took his leave with the picture.

Alone once more, Campion set himself to fathom this second mystery; here, at least, was a transformation, of which he could suspect no one—the landscape had never been out of his hands.

Anxiously he plunged his thoughts back to the period of high-strung nervous exaltation in which he had finished the portrait. Nothing was clear—till suddenly, as he sat

trying to penetrate the gloom, a ray seemed to pierce the darkness for a instant, and he shuddered. In sheer terror at himself and what might crawl to light if he persisted, he shut down the slide of his mental lantern and strained his memory no more.

But now he felt assured that his hand had in actual fact painted the fakeer, he did not recollect why or how, but he had the dread that he might recollect at any moment.

And what broke him down utterly and completely was the obvious inference that if he could paint this Hindoo beggar and forget it absolutely, he might equally have perpetrated that horrible travesty of his dearly-loved Sybil.

In that case he could never clear himself: there was no one to accuse, no one to detect. His own hand had betrayed him, and he must bear the consequences as he might.

CHAPTER VIII.

REOPENED WOUNDS.

Self-sway'd our feelings ebb and swell:
Thou lov'st no more;—Farewell! Farewell!—*Arnold.*

MAY was a fortnight old before Babcock had succeeded in inducing Mrs. Staniland to keep a long-standing promise to visit his new studio: an end which he attained by mentioning casually that he would ask Nebelsen, the German Chela, to meet her.

When the time came, he began to entertain misgivings that she would keep the appointment without thinking it advisable to bring Sybil, and he saw them both enter with intense thankfulness.

Sybil and he had met once or twice since the Grosvenor episode, and he had been surprised to find how little it seemed to have affected her. She was as animated as ever, the same witchery shone in her clear eyes, the same light-heartedness rang in her voice—or he, at least, failed to discover any alteration. She was paler, a little thinner, perhaps, but neither to an alarming nor an unbecoming extent.

She was surprised herself—for many a tempest of secret anguish had swept over her; there were humiliating times

when she caught herself pardoning, or rather forgetting, all the wrong that had been done to her, and only longing, praying, to have her lover, repentant or unrepentant, once more at her feet.

But these were moments of weakness, of which she was duly ashamed even at the time; and in public her spirit came to her aid, and compelled her to resume her ordinary manner, while she was still further reinforced by the temporary oblivion of private suffering, which is perhaps the best boon society has to bestow.

She had no particular objection to accompany her aunt that afternoon; she had known Babcock since her school-days, and did not dislike him, though she never treated him quite seriously. He had been kind, too, and more considerate than might have been expected about the portrait; and she was as glad to see him as she was to see anybody now.

He was radiant with satisfaction: 'Delighted to welcome you to my little workshop,' he said, as he took her hand. 'Do you approve?'

'Very magnificent indeed, Lionel,' she said.

It was a sumptuous studio, with a good deal of old armour and tapestry, skins and fan-palms, amongst which an easel with all the latest improvements was doing penance, possibly for idleness, in a corner.

'Well,' said Babcock, 'I've great faith in surroundings, you know. One must saturate the brain with colour and form before one attempts to produce the beautiful: don't you agree?'

'I think the brain ought to be squeezed at intervals,

Lionel,' said Sybil. 'This room is a perfect picture; but then it's the only one to be seen?'

'We shall probably find his pictures when we go to the Academy,' said Mrs. Staniland.

'I—ah—didn't send in this year,' explained Babcock. 'They've found out that I don't depend on art for bread and cheese, and when they once know *that* you haven't a chance. So I cut the Academy. There was a little bit of mine at the British Artists' last autumn, though: a "Note in Crimson and Sable"—parcels-post van on the Embankment by electric light—which I suppose you saw?'

'And nothing since that!' cried Sybil.

'Nothing,' said Babcock, in a low tone that he tried to make pregnant with meaning. 'Nothing that I could ever dare to show you—now.'

If he had been counting on feminine curiosity he was baffled, for she merely laughed, and observed: 'Then I think it's too disgraceful of you;' and before he could go on Mrs. Staniland created an unwelcome diversion by asking whether Mr. Nebelsen was coming, with the implication that she should consider herself defrauded if he was not.

'Oh ah!' said Babcock carelessly. 'He's here—he's somewhere about.'

'And you let me stay here talking!' she cried. 'Let us go to him at once.'

So Babcock had to comply and lead the way to a Moorish arch, where he drew aside the *portière*, and revealed a little octagon boudoir with stained windows,

beneath which a person of a somewhat unusual appearance was seated on a divan, with a patience which struck the mean between dignity and humility.

Axel Nebelsen was a Norwegian by birth, but had been brought up in Germany. He had been educated for the medical profession, but, having accompanied a scientific expedition to India, had there been led to abandon science for theosophy, to which his temperament—dreamy and abnormally developed in some directions—found itself powerfully attracted.

Since then he was understood to have passed much of his time in seclusion, endeavouring to prepare himself for the further ordeals necessary to complete initiation; and he was now in England for purposes the nature of which no one, himself not excepted, clearly understood.

He was a striking-looking figure, as he sat there in the dim yellow and green light. His age might have been anything between thirty and forty; his long biscuit-coloured hair was parted in the middle, and fell in spiral curls to mingle inextricably with his beard; he had pale-blue visionary eyes, with a ring of opal light round each iris, a broad innocent nose, and a mouth which no amount of hair could invest with decision.

He extended his peculiarity even to his dress, which was a long, close-fitting sort of caftan, round which a broad red sash was knotted. He took the precaution to use a less unconventional garb for outdoor wear; but, even as it was, he always left a little crowd of his own collection on the doorstep of any house he entered.

He started as from a vision when the others entered,

but he neither rose nor offered his hand, and only sat smiling with a vague sweetness.

'Here he is, you see,' said Babcock, as if he was exhibiting him. 'All alone in here.'

'Not alone—most of the time,' said the Chela, 'and not hier.' He spoke English with an amount of fluency that rendered him occasionally unintelligible.

Mrs. Staniland, according to her wont, took complete possession of him. 'Ah!' she said, with infinite relish. 'That's how I like to hear you talk; now go on—don't let's waste time in trivialities. Be interesting. We never finished our delightful little chat about Karma and Nirvâna. Do you know I find theosophy most enlarging for the ideas? And, positively, if I hadn't been brought up to be quite so orthodox, I should be very much tempted to adopt your doctrines. But I suppose I'm too old?'

'Yes,' said the Chela, with refreshing candour; 'it is late now to begin.'

'Still,' pursued Mrs. Staniland, 'I like to keep up with all the new movements, and when I find one that deserves a little encouragement, I'm only too glad to do anything for it.'

'Matam,' said the Chela stiffly, 'theosophy is not at all in need to be, as you say, upon the back smacked.'

'Oh—of course I quite understand that—still, it can do you no harm to be more widely known, *can* it? And I should be very pleased to bring together a little circle of influential friends to meet you, if you would tell them something about all these wonderful things.'

'The Western World is not as yet ripe for all the most wonderful,' said the Chela.

'Oh, but I could pick you out some really ripe people,' urged Mrs. Staniland; 'do come and show us phenomena, just as I hear you did at Mrs. Mason Green's, where I met you first.'

'I cannot bromise to do you a phenomenon, until the brothers haf been gonsulted, but I will com and dalk to you, if you like.'

'You were going to tell me something when we met last about a wonderful teacher you had out in India, Mr. Nebelsen,' said Mrs. Staniland. 'I should so like to hear.'

'About my guru or Mahatma? Yes,' said the Chela, 'he is a quite wonderful man, who has evolved himself into what we call a "sixth rounder" by developing his higher principles—never can I his name without reverence bronounce, that wise and well-educated adept whose occult title is Shang Gasba.'

'And now tell us, Nebelsen, what has he taught you?' said Babcock.

'Much that I cannot speak of. From him I learn all I know of the existences in *Akaska*, the shells, and lost and earth-bound souls which infest the atmosphere; his instruction has taught me how to leaf my body, and with thought-like quickness through unlimited space to wander, to materialise objects out of the gosmic dustbin, or to resolve matter again into its gonstituent elements, to transport things in one instant many thousand miles. And with the counsels of my revered

master, I am able the dremendous Nature forces by simple will-bower to gontrol.'

'But do you ever do it?' inquired Babcock.

'Nevare,' replied Nebelsen.

'That's where I think you make a mistake. You might raise the tone of your miracles, my dear fellow; there's a very good opening just now for a new faith, but naturally people want to be sure it's a going concern before they invest in it.'

'I am often teased to broduce manifestations, but they are only allowed oggasionally when the brothers are in the humour. You would not believe how they dislike to show themselves off, and my own resbected guru is in that respect himself the worst of all.'

'Bad policy,' said Babcock, 'you'll never get Theosophy into our heads by rapping.'

'The adepts haf no wish to gonvince the Western World.'

'Then they might have left it alone altogether. As it is, they give you a shilling, and won't let you change it, or even let the world see it's a good one!'

'Arcane Knowledge addresses himself at Faith and not at Reason,' said the Chela. 'It is perhaps true that the brothers garry this a leedle far, and so I haf tolt my Mahatma.'

'How often do you see him?' Mrs. Staniland asked.

'I never have seen him—all our communications are in writing. I write to him a long ledder, and he sends it back in an hour or two hours with an answer.'

'Do you think he would care to come to me when

you do?' said Mrs. Staniland, 'because I will send him a card with pleasure.'

'No, he would not accept,' answered Nebelsen, evidently a little aghast at the suggestion. 'He is in Thibet always.'

'Then how does he answer you in an hour or two?'

'To an occultist it is quite easy—the ledder is forwarded and returned on a magnetic current.'

'And you send your own letters in that way?'

'No, I gif them to a frient who is more advanced; he sends them for me, and returns them answered—it is most gonvenient,' said the Chela.

During this conversation Sybil's attention had slightly wandered. This studio recalled by force of contrast another which was not magnificent; and a strong manly face, with the keen quizzical eyes that could be so tender at a word from her, rose before her. Suppose Ronald were to come to her and beg forgiveness, suppose he insisted masterfully that he had only read her a well-needed lesson—would she have firmness enough to maintain her ground? If she could only believe that he had not intended to gain his freedom, if he could but persuade her of that, she might—but, after all, there was no danger of losing her dignity as a justly offended woman—he never would come now!

'What are you looking so serious about?' asked Babcock, crossing to her side.

'Am I serious? I think I was wondering why you have a grand piano. I never heard you play.'

'Oh, yes,' he said in a weary high-pitched tone, 'I strum a little; it is one of my few pleasures' (if so it was at least a simple one, for he restricted himself to one finger). 'Won't you come and try it?'

She rose and passed into the studio with him. 'Yes,' he said, leaning languidly on the instrument, 'my piano is my favourite companion, my constant consoler. I fly to it when I am restless, heartsick, overworked—I'm glad I amuse you.'

Sybil could never maintain her gravity when he struck the pathetic note.

'You are too funny when you want to be pitied—and for overwork too. Now confess that most of your painting is done at this piano, though I must say,' she added as she played softly, 'you have let it get frightfully out of tune—or is the poor thing heartsick too?'

He was rather angry. 'I wish you could be serious. You never seem to consider me a real painter.'

'I will if you will only paint a real picture. But you are so abominably lazy that I don't believe you ever will.'

He was not offended, for such is our fallen nature that most men accept this reproach from a woman as implying a compliment; besides she was affording him the opening he had been waiting for. 'You wrong me,' he said. 'I may not do all I might, but then I have no one to inspire me, to urge me on, to care what work I produce.'

'No,' she agreed sympathetically. 'And it's too bad to expect you to do anything till you find somebody who will do all that for you—isn't it?'

'You turn everything into ridicule,' he said im-

patiently, 'and yet I could show you a picture if I chose, that will prove to you that I can work when I take the trouble.'

'Then please do.'

'Once I looked forward to showing it to you—but that is all over. I cannot show it—least of all to *you*.'

'And why?'

'Because it has been ruined.'

'I thought an oil painting was never hopeless! At least you could show it to me. Who knows, I might encourage you—it is probably much better than you think, and surely you need not dread my opinion.'

'Sybil,' he said, 'it is best that you should not see it—this time, perhaps, you will take my warning!'

He risked the allusion, which, however, escaped her at the moment; she was pleased to be sceptical as to the existence of any picture. How far Babcock was sincere in his wish to keep her from seeing it, he probably could not have said himself; he had a distinct grievance. He wanted her to know it for many reasons, but with all his affectations, he was no fool, and was quite alive to the danger of seeming to force his inquiry.

Sybil laughed mischievously. 'You shall not escape like that. If you refuse me, you will not refuse Aunt Hilary, or if you do, I shall know what to think.'

And she went back to the octagon room, in time to hear her aunt, after questioning Herr Nebelsen closely upon the precise hue of her *aura*, observe 'Not really; a sort of purplish mauve—how truly hideous; the very *last* colour I should care to be seen in! Do tell me, now,

is there anything I can do to change it?' Sybil's appeal, coming at that moment, was not too amiably received.

'If Lionel has any hesitation in showing you his picture,' she replied, 'depend upon it, he has excellent reasons. I'm surprised you should condescend to press him!'

'Don't be hard on a fellow, Mrs. Staniland,' said Babcock. 'I shall be very happy to show the canvas to you, and leave you to say whether I am not right.'

'This is getting mysterious!' said Sybil, 'so there really *is* a picture! Do go, auntie.'

Mrs. Staniland was struck by something in Babcock's manner, and followed him into a room beyond the studio, leaving her niece to entertain the Chela.

Sybil eyed him rather apprehensively as he sat there —he looked so very mystic and uncanny. Presently he fixed his pale eyes upon her and said in his deep guttural tones, 'You are not much interested in occultism —you do not even perhaps believe that such things can be?'

'It's no good saying pretty things to him if he really can read thoughts,' she considered, and decided upon perfect candour.

'It is a good deal to believe all at once, you know,' she said. 'I don't pretend to understand it, but I should have thought if you had all these marvellous powers you might make some use of them.'

'How use of them?' he demanded.

'It isn't such a happy world surely,' she said, 'that there is no one in it to be saved from danger, or temptation, or misery of some sort. If you can read the future

and see forces at work that we can't see, you might do so much to warn or help people, if you chose!'

'It is not engouraged,' he said, a little reluctantly; 'we have, you see, to be very careful not to interfere with the oberation of Karma. And shust think, what is any one human earth life, only a schmall leedle bead upon a long string of successive entity-ingarnations! Its sufferings? Either they are bunishments deserved in the brevious life, or else they are in the next to be regompensed—no, no, that we who are adepts must not disblay a sensational bower is, believe me, a wise and brudent arrainchment—many times has my Mahatma explained that to me.'

Sybil said nothing, though her expression was not one of entire conviction, and before the Theosophist could bring any further arguments to bear upon her, Mrs. Staniland called her, rather to her relief, to come at once to the room where Babcock's picture was to be seen, and she obeyed with some curiosity.

'Quite right of Lionel to consider your feelings, my dear,' said Mrs. Staniland, who was standing before an easel on which the canvas had just been placed, 'but I knew you were too sensible to mind seeing it, and I thought it as well that you should.'

'I like the landscape part, Lionel,' said Sybil, after examining it, 'you are not quite so lazy as I accused you of being—only,' and she drew her eyebrows together, 'what does that extraordinary figure mean in the middle of it—and what is it sitting on?'

'Ah, my dear!' said Mrs. Staniland, with a sigh of portentous meaning, 'that is the point!'

'That's just the thing,' said Babcock. 'That I'm not responsible for.'

'It was like this, my dear,' explained Mrs. Staniland. 'Lionel has been telling me all about it. He'd painted the landscape, and Sieditoff wanted it for his gallery in Bond Street, only he thought it ought to have a figure in the foreground. Well, and so Lionel took it to a friend of his who was a good figure-painter, Lionel has never gone in for figure-painting, and he told him what an opportunity this was for him and asked him to do it, and he said he would. And this is what he chose to do—a horrid figure which is too ridiculously absurd, hanging in the air, and out of all proportion and keeping besides! And Lionel is afraid Sieditoff won't take it now, and if he does, he can't sell it, and he daren't try to scrape it out or paint it over for fear of making it worse. It was a piece of jealousy and deliberate spite on the friend's part.'

'What a hateful, mean wretch he must be!' cried Sybil. 'But why,' and then she stopped—'do I know him? Oh, don't say it was *he*. Aunt Hilary, you might, yes, you *might* have spared me this!' And her short upper lip quivered indignantly.

'I thought it necessary it should not be hidden from you, my dear,' said the old lady calmly.

'Then please understand, both of you, as you are kind enough to discuss my affairs together,' said Sybil, haughtily, 'that it was not necessary at all. I wanted no warning to tell me that Mr. Campion is a treacherous friend; whatever he chooses to do now does not concern me in the least, and you insult me when you think it can!'

And she turned away with the gesture of an offended princess. She was very angry, indeed—all the angrier because she had needed the warning only too well.

Listening to the Chela's conversation was better than remaining there after that, and she went back to the little alcove with the stained glass.

Babcock followed her out of the room with discomfited eyes. 'That's just what I was afraid of, you know,' he said in an undertone; 'she'll blame *me* most over this business!'

'Not when she has had time to cool—it was far better to undeceive her once for all; she was not half as angry as she ought to have been about the other matter. I could see from several things that she was quite disposed for a reconciliation, which would never have done! But that is all over now, if I know her; she's the kind of girl to be far more unforgiving for anybody else's injury than her own.'

'She's a darling—I know that,' muttered Babcock.

Mrs. Staniland looked at him with a rather surprised approval. 'So you are beginning to find that out?' she said. 'At last!'

'I've known her ever since she was a little girl with long hair, don't you know,' said Babcock, 'and a ripping little girl she was too! Only, somehow, I never fell quite so desperately in love till I heard she was engaged to that confounded Campion! And—and do you think there's a chance for me?'

'If you don't worry the poor child too soon—yes. It is quite what I should wish for her myself, and so would

her father, I'm sure. You may count upon my doing all I can for you!'

'Thanks. And you think I can make my mind pretty easy?'

'I don't say that. You must be patient and bide your time, and let her forget that most worthless and ungrateful young man, and then—and then we shall see.'

Something in Sybil's appearance as she came back to him struck the Chela, who was beginning to feel a decided interest in this pale proud English girl, who looked so sensitive and so sweet.

'Tell me,' he began almost at once, 'you have seen in there something which has disturbed you, and made you unhappy—not so?'

'Yes, a little,' said Sybil, too miserable just then to repel his curiosity. 'I was reminded in the picture of a per—I mean of things I hoped I had forgotten. Please don't ask me any more.'

'I am going now,' he said, 'to make a leedle bersonal gonfession. It is not quite what I myself think, that which I shust now say of not interfering und so weiter. You see, as yet I am only what you would call a "half-fledge," I gannot yet trust to my own indisgretion. My Mahatma, who is a very wise man, does not encourage it—he is always in the way. He is berhaps right, and I haf not yet enough brogress made to direct my powers with gomblete cocksurety. Still I do not know—without moch bractice can no berfection be, and my heart's beloved Mahatma is not in material things a man of business.

'And I tell you, you haf made me reflect. Till now

I never use my occult power except in quite a schmall way, and not at all for benevolent ends. But the first time, and I bromise you this, the first time that I see a case in which my esoterical stoddies-acquirements of advantage might becom, I hesitate not, whether my Mahatma is willing or not, to exberiment. You shall see that occult powers is not entirely an imagination's work.'

Sybil only smiled, for even then the Chela's confidences and solemn conviction of his own mystic attainments appealed to her sense of humour, but she was somewhat impressed by him notwithstanding. She could not think him a charlatan; she was sure he was perfectly sincere and simple-minded in his queer rhapsodies and cloudy philosophy.

Mrs. Staniland and Babcock were not long in reappearing, and the visit, which, from Babcock's point of view, had not proved wholly unsuccessful, was brought to a close.

A very unusual humility in Babcock's manner as he went down the stairs of the flat by Sybil's side made her feel an impulse of self-reproach. After all, it was not his fault; he had even tried to keep from her what she had just learnt.

So her eyes were contrite and sweet, without a trace of coquetry or malice in them, as she said, 'I didn't mean to be cross to you just now. It was not fair to treat you so; *you* were kind at least!'

His face cleared visibly. 'That's right. We're fellow-partners in misfortune; we've both been—I mean the same—that is, we ought to be drawn together more by it all!'

As the words left him he wished he had held his tongue, for Sybil instantly froze, and did not speak again until they reached the carriage.

When Babcock returned to his own flat after seeing his visitors off, he found Nebelsen standing before his picture. 'Like it?' he said.

'No—not at all,' replied the Chela. 'Why have you bainted a yogi performing his *japa* in the yoga posture?'

'I thought you would say that. Poor little Miss Elsworth couldn't stand that yogi either; it upset her most awfully!'

'Why then do you baint so as to upset people awfully?' demanded the Chela. 'You have learnt that in India—yes?'

'If you must know, Nebelsen, that idiotic Hindoo isn't my work at all; it was done, for some low purpose of his own, by a scoundrel named Campion.'

'But it upset that so charming Mees Elsvort!'

'Yes—that's a long story. But the upshot of it is that he had almost trapped her into consenting to marry him, till he played very much the same trick upon her that he did on me.'

'I see—I see well,' muttered the Chela, 'it was that, then, which she to forget desired. Tell me, where does this Gampion live? I want to look him up, and rebroach him!'

'You shall have his address, old boy!' said Babcock, with much heartiness, and he gave it to the Chela, who departed with all the exaltation of a great mission.

It was evident to him that the English girl, who had

spoken with such pensive sadness of the duty of helping those in danger, spoke with a strong personal meaning. It was an appeal—and he was to have the privilege of coming to her rescue.

His highly-trained faculties had detected in an instant that the pictured yogi was not a mere copy of the ordinary religious mendicant from some Indian sketch-book; there were marks upon him which, to the Chela's experienced eyes, betrayed an occultist of no mean skill; an occultist, however, who had used his knowledge for unworthy ends.

This unscrupulous painter was clearly in league with this follower of the Black Magic. He had been subjecting an innocent maiden to ruthless persecution. Well, he should find that she was not so helpless as he fondly imagined

'And she,' he muttered, 'she shall recognise that there is at last something in Theosophy!'

CHAPTER IX.

PUT TO THE TEST.

If it is true what the Prophets write,
That the heathen gods are all stocks and stones;
Shall we, for the sake of being polite,
Feed them with the juice of our marrow-bones?—*Blake.*

When a young man of spirit finds himself suddenly scorned and rejected by the mistress he adores, his most obvious course is to plunge into reckless dissipation, which may haply reach her ears, a result of which the advantages are too clear to need demonstration. Nor must he omit to rail against the false one and her sex with all the cynicism he can command. But Ronald Campion, hard hit as he was, could not have been a young man of spirit, for he did neither the one nor the other. Not the first, because, in spite of everything, he still hoped, and was determined to do nothing now which might hereafter keep him from Sybil's side. Not the second, because, even in his most poignant despair, he admitted that Sybil could not have acted otherwise than she had done. She was still his ideal, parted from him by a misunderstanding which he could only trust to live down in time, though it is sometimes a sanguine pro-

ceeding to enter into a tontine with misunderstandings—they are apt to thrive as do annuitants.

But for some time his life 'crept on a broken wing,' and he lounged about other men's studios rather aimlessly, and smoked continuously, and was a good deal at his club, where he perhaps played more poker than was good for his pocket, even if he did not lose more than the fair value of temporary forgetfulness.

Then he left town, to make some studies of apple-blossom, and broom, and thorn; but he could not stay away long, and for the first time the loveliness of Spring had lost its charm for him.

His only chance of peace of mind lay in desperate hard work, and he came back resolved to throw his whole energy into completing some studies he had made earlier in the year for his next picture.

There was little peace of mind, however, in his own studio, where his nerves and temper were constantly being tried by a series of petty mishaps and small worries.

Most of us have had short experiences of this kind, when inanimate objects seem inspired by a perverted ingenuity of malice,—a quite indispensable article, for example, emulating the violet in its retiring modesty, and when, and not until, the need for it has ceased, turning up in some obvious place with a brazen assumption upon it of having been there from the first. And in the search we have barked ourselves, it may be, in all the most impossible places and against furniture which goes positively out of its way to annoy us; we have overturned

our most fragile possessions, and they have broken other things yet more cherished; we have made ourselves hot and fidgety, and generally unfit for whatever we have to do.

Perhaps a 'burst' of this kind lasts at most five minutes, but if the reader can conceive it extending over hours, and over days, some idea may be formed of Campion's state of mind at the end of it.

Accidents, small but exasperating, were continually taking place in his studio: he had not a cast or study on his walls which was not injured or defaced in some way; and Bales, after denying the damage as long as possible, ascribed it at last to cats,—though it was hard to see what the most rigid feline prudery could object to in graceful copies from Greek or Etruscan antiquities.

Campion was perpetually haunted by an unspeakably tormenting impression that he ought to do something—he did not know what—at once, that time was pressing, and the thing still undone.

And this would make him so restless, so nervous, irritable, and captious, that his models refused to sit to him, and his friends grew chary of looking him up.

He was in his sitting-room one night, moodily smoking, and wondering whether he could summon sufficient energy to go as far as his club in the course of the evening, when Bales brought him in a foreign-looking card on which the name of 'Axel Nebelsen' was printed.

'Can't say as I like the looks of him myself,' observed his factotum. 'I told him, bein' a furriner, as you weren't in need of no models at present, but he wouldn't take a

denial, and I caught him a-eyein' of the umberellas very suspicious.'

The name did not happen to suggest anything to Campion just then, and it was late for a stranger to call. However, he was spared the trouble of deciding whether to receive him or not, for the Chela had followed Bales in and motioned to him to leave the room, which, after glancing at Campion for confirmation, he did, with an air of disclaiming all responsibility for anything that might follow.

Nebelsen said nothing for some moments, but only stood, stiff and silent, within the radius of the lamp, and fixed his eyes solemnly upon the astounded painter, who began to feel distinctly uncomfortable, and moved within easy reach of the bell.

'Your guilty gonscience tells you already for what I am hier!' began the Chela at last.

'It has not mentioned it at present,' said Campion. 'Hadn't you better take a chair and tell me yourself?'

'Ha!' cried Nebelsen with a snort, 'you think to make a tomfool of me with this diabolical hell's-coolness! If you do not know, why do you so startled look at me?'

'My dear sir,' expostulated Campion, 'it is not so usual as you seem to think for me to receive distinguished foreigners in a state of obvious excitement.'

'I am hier, then, to tell you that your evil bractices must all this night to an end com. You see, I know well who and what you are!'

'If you are under any impression that I'm the Patriarch Job, you may find yourself mistaken presently,' observed Campion.

'You are a gowardly bersecutor of beauty and innocence—that is what you are!'

'Let me advise you, for your own sake, not to be an ass!'

'Rather would I an ass than a serpent be!'

'Your tastes have evidently been considered. Now, look here: will you be civil and come to the point, or do you want me to pitch you out of the window? What on earth do you mean by all this balderdash?'

'If I speak to you in balderdash,' said the Chela, who seemed to attach another meaning to the term, 'it is only because you haf well deserved. The oder day I was in Mr. Babcock's studio, where also came a yong laty, lofely and schweet as the lily, and her name was Elsvort—have you heard enoff?'

'A good deal too much!' cried Campion, whose temper was roused at last. 'What right have you to mention that young lady to me? Will you leave the house at once!'

'Not at all,' said the Chela, with an unconscious reminiscence of Poe's raven, 'you must hear. I was there when she saw the shape you bainted for Mr. Babcock—now at last I preek you!'

'Yes,' said Campion, 'if it's any gratification to you—you have. I'll hear you; tell me everything. She saw it, then! Well, what did she do? what did she say?'

'I tell you only this—you will never brevail, never—she regards you with an unspeakable horror-agitation.'

'Ah!' said Campion, 'and—and she sent you here to tell me so, eh?'

'No one send me. I com on my own head,' said Nebelsen.

'And I'm afraid you will go out in the same way,' said Campion, 'unless you can give me some reason for this interference.'

'Listen,' said the Chela: 'you do not seem to me all gorrupt as yet. Obey the brompting of your bedder ainchel, and let your natural heart-gootness bobble up fresh again and safe you from Avitchi before too late. Renounce this Faust-gombact, this fiend, master or servant; meddle no more with the bad Black Magic!'

Campion stared at him helplessly. 'Is there anything else you would recommend me to do?' he said; 'sell my thoroughbred broomstick, and give up my little trip to the moon? Don't let any false delicacy restrain you from mentioning it.'

'Beware! you cannot blay with me,' said Nebelsen seriously.

'I was not proposing to play with you,' retorted Campion, who was gradually forgetting his annoyance; 'now can't you tell me what it's all about?'

'You haf brocured som Indian yogi to help you to indimidate Mees Elsvort to betroth herself to you; you haf dabbled in magic of the left-hand side. Well, if you are mystic, I also am mystic, and behindt me is my ever-honoured Mahatma, Shang Gasba. It is White Magic against the Black—I and my master against you and your mendicant fakeer; think what chances haf you!'

'It sounds sporting,' said Campion,' but, my dear, good man, you're talking arrant bosh. I'm not a mystic, I don't enter into unholy alliances with Indian beggars, I'm not acquainted with sacred mendicants; but I should not

have imagined they would be of much assistance in a European love affair.'

The Chela passed his hand across his forehead with a bewildered air. 'You are speaking the truth,' he said, 'I feel it; all the time I was wondering that your aura could of so favourable a golour remain. Still, if it is not a yogi, and you are not to blame, why did you baint a yogi in mystical meditation?—where haf you seen such a thing? It is very gurious.'

'I've done a more curious thing than that,' said Campion, 'and I know just as little how I came to do it.'

Nebelsen sat down opposite to Campion and laid a hand upon his knee. 'It may berhaps be that only Theosophy can supply the exblanation. Forgif me that I so hasty was, and tell me what it is you do not understandt.'

There was a kind of ponderous innocence about this Germanised Norwegian, which was rather engaging, and Campion found himself completely disarmed by it.

'Shall I?' he said. 'Well, it can do no harm, and at all events, you are sure to believe me.' And he told him how cruelly and inexplicably his portrait had been altered, and how everything had been persistently going wrong ever since.

The Chela heard him with the deepest attention, and, when he had finished, touched him on the breast with his forefinger to emphasise the importance of what he was going to say.

'There are beople who would tell you in my blace that

it was a case simply of ungonscious cerebration. I say—bah!'

'But you're not going to confine yourself to that explanation?' said Campion.

'At first I gonfess I was gombletely buzzled. Now I com to the gonclusion that you are being molested by one of those semi-intelligent greatures of the astral light which we call "elementals" whom you haf attracted into your neighbourhood.'

'Ah?' said Campion gravely.

'You see, you are evidently what in our philosophy is termed a "sensitive," and your spirit has berhaps becom odylized by the aura of this disingarnate bersonality, this elemental, until between your own astral part and the disembodied spirit an identity of molecular vibration is at times established—is that clear?'

'Simplicity itself,' said Campion.

'Is it not?' said the Chela, highly delighted with his own perspicacity; 'and now you understand?'

'But what does this thing mean by spoiling my canvases?' demanded Campion.

'Brobably it could not itself tell you; in these elementals there is a gurious blayfulness.'

'If that is an elemental's notion of fun, I can't follow him,' said Campion. 'Well, Herr Nebelsen, you have found a theory, but I want something more. I want to get at that elemental and punch his head and take his fun out of him. I dare say you will say that is impossible, and I'm much of the same opinion myself. But you must have some remedy to suggest?'

'A remedy? oh yes!' said the Chela; 'there is one which all initiates regognise as very goot against hostile elementals: send to your *apotheke* for one—or bedder, for two—ounces nitre, and put them in a plate with one ounce vitriol—it will drive him away—most likely.'

Campion could retain his gravity no longer—he roared with laughter. 'Why not beetle-poison?' he said, most disrespectfully. 'My dear sir, I can't help it. I'm afraid you can't assist me very much, though it's kind of you to wish to try.'

'Let me dry still more,' said the Chela. 'You laugh now: some day, perhaps, you do not laugh. On a word from you, I will blace all my occult faculties in your service. I will even—though it will probably make him very cross—with my venerable Mahatma gommunicate.'

Campion shook his head laughingly. 'No, no, my dear Herr Nebelsen,' he said. 'It's only fair to tell you I can't believe in all these things. They seem to me the merest moonshine.'

'Moonshine, perhaps,' said the Chela, rising to go. 'Only remember—moonshine is not less real as sunshine.'

And he glided out and down the small garden path, with the air of a man who was above the empty ostentation of vanishing.

But when he was alone, he was dispirited by the result of his mission. This English maiden was no beauty in distress after all; her emotion at the sight of Campion's work was merely a revival of wounded female vanity; he could do nothing for her.

And he had been so positive. Where had his clair-

voyant insight gone, to be so much at fault? His finer and more spiritual faculties were being dimmed and corrupted by so much forced contact with grosser natures; why, wondered poor Nebelsen, had the Mahatma sent him to this materialistic city? why could he not have studied in peace under the wing of the good brothers?

Still he had something to do now. Here was a psychical mystery to be unravelled. What a triumph for Theosophy if he were to be permitted to find the clue! And then that sweet Miss Elsworth would smile with approval and confess that Theosophists had real powers and could use them for unselfish ends.

Whether it was that Campion did not follow the nitre and vitriol prescription, or from other causes, things went no better with him after the Chela's visit. He began to have a dismal conviction that they never would go well again.

Bills came in, and he was beginning to be pressed for money. The probate proceedings, on which so much depended, were naturally—it was only the beginning of June—far enough from a hearing; but from all he could learn the will was not likely to survive its eccentric author by many months

He would have instructed a solicitor to look after his interests if he had seen the least prospect of being able to pay the lightest costs, but it mattered little since, in any case, his legacy was doomed.

And then, for two or three days he had been obliged to be idle, having strained his right hand in shifting his furniture.

All of which did not tend to improve his temper; and when, one afternoon early in June, the Chela walked into his studio unannounced, Campion only just repressed an expression of his irritation.

Nebelsen was evidently excited. 'I came at once,' he cried, 'I could not wait. I haf shust now to the Grosvenor Galerie been. I went' (and here his face became a little pink) 'to see Mess Elsvort's bortrait—ach, it is *schrechlich!*'

Campion had already begun to repent his confidences. 'I am quite aware of that,' he said, 'but I don't enjoy talking about it.'

'No, no—not of that; but I want to tell you how I find there a somthing that has an altogether new theory inspired.'

'I don't feel quite up to Theosophy just now,' said Campion wearily. 'Suppose we talk of something else?'

'Oh, yes, you will hear this,' said Nebelsen persuasively. 'In Mr. Babcock's picture is an Indian yogi, and in that bortrait is an Indian—perhaps a Burmese—idol. You could not haf done either one or the other, because you haf never seen them. Now why should both——?'

'I don't know whether it affects your theory,' said Campion, 'but if I can't explain the yogi (and I confess I can't) the idol can be perfectly well accounted for. I painted it from—from something I happened to have by me.'

'So!' said the Chela; evidently this had upset his latest theory. 'You haf it still hier?'

'Somewhere. I was re-arranging my things the other day, and I put it on a shelf out of the way.'

'May I haf it down to examine?' and Campion brought the idol from its retirement, not with the best grace in the world, for the fact was, it had been banished because he had taken a strong dislike to it.

Nebelsen carried it carefully to a side-table, and, folding his arms, regarded it thoughtfully for some time; then he came nearer, and seemed to be testing the air with his outspread fingers, and finally he turned to Campion in triumph.

'At last, and this time without a doubt, I haf the glue!' he cried.

'You don't say so?' said Campion carelessly

Nebelsen caught him by the sleeve and led him up to the image. 'I am going to tell you a thing by which you will be moch surbrised. All your unluck and hart lines are by this blacid-seeming gross-leg caused.'

Campion looked at him sharply for a moment, suspecting some hidden meaning; but the Chela was quite innocent of any allusion to the secret engagement, of which he had never heard.

'I tell you,' he repeated, 'I haf no longer any doubt; it radiates quite perceptibly an evil magnetism. I feel it from here.'

'What a funny person you are, Nebelsen!' said Campion, laughing in spite of himself.

'I am not fonning, I am quite serious. What, do you not beleaf?'

'Not a bit. I was brought up "a happy Christian

child," Nebelsen, as our nursery verse says. I can't believe in a working idol.'

'As an idol—no. But may he not haf been so saturated with the bersonal magnetism of a very bowerful medium that he finally attains an automatic gonsciousness to himself?'

'I should have thought it slightly improbable.'

'Answer me only this. Are there no oggurrences you remember which you can distinctly gonnect with that image? I beg you to be gandid.'

Campion reflected conscientiously. 'Let me see,' he said. 'The boy who brought it here was run over just at the door—boys always are getting run over. My fellow Bales and I came to grief when we tried to put it up on a bracket in my room, and there was a pretty big smash; and I believe it fell down again with Bales when he was taking it to be washed!'

'You see,' cried Nebelsen, 'but there is more to tell, is there not?'

'Well,' said Campion reluctantly, 'it did kill a dog certainly—at least the dog upset the pedestal, and that thing fell down and flattened the poor brute. And, oh, well, I dare say you could pick out several other coincidences about as striking if you took the trouble.'

'Seferal goincidences together an inference make. I tell you, and I am sure of it, that—in some way even I do not bretend to understandt—that image is imbued with a force which enables it to brotect itself!'

'You mean to tell me you seriously believe all this bosh? Look here: I'll settle this at once, and then I

hope you'll let me hear no more of it. Here goes for your self-conscious image!'

He took the idol by its conical head and jerked it contemptuously on to the floor. It bounded in three long skips, duck and-drake-fashion, across the floor, and rolled through a large mirror which was leaning against the wall, and the fragments of glass cut gaping rents in some newly stretched canvases and finished studies behind.

Nebelsen pointed to the idol, which was smiling amidst the débris like a sleeping infant. 'You call that no broof?' he said triumphantly.

Campion was amused at his obstinacy. 'If you are going to see marvels in everything,' he said, 'why, I could make a bowl do the same thing any day; but I suppose you would call that offended dignity, too. Nebelsen, I *must* cure you of this nonsense, it's so bad for you. We'll try it again with a more subtle sort of outrage. Ah! I think this will do.'

Nebelsen had already replaced the image upon a table, and Campion took a tube of carmine which happened to be near, and with his thumb drew a broad smear across the idol's eyes, to the Chela's extreme horror.

'Take care,' he cried. 'It is not wise to irritate him too far!'

'That ought to draw him, if he has the spirit of a zoophyte,' said Campion; 'but he bears it, Nebelsen, you see—"smiles as he was wont to smile"—and I still breathe!'

'We shall see,' was the Chela's sole observation. He seemed at once disappointed and relieved.

'Ah, you're incorrigible!' said Campion, laughing. 'Never mind, we won't quarrel about it.'

'You will not object if I submit the case to my Mahatma for his advice?' said Nebelsen,—'I will get the Brother who is over hier to forward a gommunication for me. And, if it is not too great an interference with Karma, and if the Mahatma happens in a goot temper to be, I shall perhaps an answer which will gonfirm my obinion receive, and be able then to tell you what you ought next to do.'

'Do just as you please about it, Nebelsen,' said Campion. 'But I can't promise to follow your directions.'

CHAPTER X.

CONVICTION.

On the evening of the day when Nebelsen had accused the idol, Campion went to his club, and, as had become a habit of his, joined the 'poker'-playing set in the card-room. But that night he did not play long; whether the light was bad, or he was more than usually careless in glancing at his hand, he found himself betting confidently on a supposed 'red-flush' or a 'sequence' of hearts and diamonds, when the final challenge to show his cards would invariably reveal the presence of an unsuspected spade or club, which of course, by the laws of 'poker,' was fatal to his pretensions. Even then he could not accept the ruling of the rest without some protest, and found himself so continually at variance on the question of suits and sequences, that at last, after losing more heavily than usual, he left the game in disgust, only just refraining from hinting his suspicion of a combination to persuade him against his own senses. This, as he saw when he had grown cooler, was not probable conduct in such a place; but the men had certainly behaved very oddly, and he decided to avoid the card-room for the future.

He had quite dismissed the incident, however, by the

following day, when he was able to return to the study he was making for his next picture, a scene from 'Christabel'; the lost sense of power and delight in work came back to him.

His friend Perceval, who looked in about this time, was surprised by his animation. 'Hear you made yourself rather unpleasant at the club last night,' he began; 'some of the younger fellows thought you meant to charge them with cheating, and swear they'll bring the matter before the committee.'

'Cheating!' said Campion, who, now he came to think of it, was afraid he might have gone too far, 'such an idea never entered my head. I'm sorry they should have misunderstood me like that. All I thought was that it was a practical joke between them, for when I found they all insisted my hearts were spades, why, you know it was annoying; and I had nothing but red flushes all through.'

'Hum,' said Perceval, going up to the study, 'got a red flush here, too, I see—what is it?'

Campion, deserting the classics for romance, had chosen as his subject the first meeting of the lovely lady Christabel and the dangerous Geraldine in the wood.

'I remember,' said the elder artist, on being told the subject; 'but wasn't it a "midnight wood," and hadn't one of them "a silken robe of white, that shadowy in the moonlight shone," if I remember my Coleridge? Why have you made 'em meet at *sunset*?'

'You call that sunset! I thought I had caught rather a good moonlight effect myself.'

'Oh, very well; but—crimson moss and scarlet turf! Come, Campion, this is more eccentric than ever.'

'Crimson? scarlet? Nonsense! Greys and greens, you mean. Why, where are your eyes, "making the green one red" like this?'

'I may be wrong,' said Perceval, with a quiet forbearance that provoked Campion.

'May be! My dear fellow, you *are*,' he said. 'We'll soon settle it,' and he shouted down his tube for Bales, who presently appeared, as usual under protest.

'Were you requiring me for any purpose in partickler?' he said. 'I was just going about those frames you ordered; but of course if I'm *wanted* here I can stay.'

'Just come over and tell Mr. Perceval and me what strikes you as the chief colour in this picture.'

Bales coughed behind his hand, and looked from one man to the other. At last he said, with a feeling that it was a case for caution and periphrasis, 'Well, if it was me, I shouldn't leave it about loose where there was a bull!'

'Are *you* going to tell me it's red?' cried Campion.

'Pillar-boxes is fools to it,' returned Bales sententiously, and Campion dismissed him impatiently.

When they were alone, Perceval said kindly: 'Don't let this upset you; it's overwork, that's all. Only, if I were you, I should see someone about it, you know.'

Campion turned a ghastly face upon him. 'I see,' he said; 'I'm colour-blind, then?'

'I'm afraid there's some temporary affection—bless you, it's the commonest thing in the world,' said Perceval,

'nothing to give way about, man. Just stick to black and white for a few days and see an oculist, and you'll be all right. I'll make it all right with those fellows at the Club, so you needn't worry about that. By the way, there was that head of Cybele of mine you wanted to make some studies of—now's your time. I'll send it over to you, only be careful with it. I had the cast taken expressly for me at Athens, and I don't believe I could get it replaced.'

'Thanks,' said Campion, 'it's very good of you.'

'Don't talk rubbish! And, see here: I've taken a house-boat for the summer—it's at Wargrave just now—why not run down for a few days?—come with me next Saturday.'

'If this lasts,' said Campion, 'I shan't be able to trust myself near a river.'

'Pooh! it won't last. I shall expect you, then, and let you know about the train—that's all right; and you shall have the Cybele this evening.'

After he had gone, Campion gave himself up to the gloomy realisation of his future—colour-blind, why, it was only a degree better than total blindness! Henceforth he could trust no tints, no hue that might for the moment delight his eye, and if he tried to place them on canvas, his palette, too, would lie to him! It was the end of his career as a colourist, unless he could unlearn all he knew and paint, as a man with no ear may play, powerless either to correct or enjoy his own performance.

As he sat with his face buried in his hands, crushed by this last blow, a hand was laid on his shoulder, and he turned, to find the Chela.

'Ha, Nebelsen!' he said wildly, 'you come in time to congratulate me—I've just discovered I'm colour-blind. Pleasant that for a painter, eh?'

'And now at last you beleaf?' cried Nebelsen.

'Believe? in what? Oh, I see what you mean,' and Campion glanced at the smeared face of the idol, which was almost pathetic in its gentle resignation. 'Nebelsen, it's too ridiculous—I won't believe it!'

'Have you the head so hard?' said the Chela. 'The test was yours.'

'I tell you this is serious; for Heaven's sake, don't drag that foolish idol into it. Can't you let me forget!' And Campion, anxious to remove all traces of an act which, in this last affliction, seemed so frivolous and puerile, caught up a piece of old Venetian embroidery, which happened to come first to hand, and hastily wiped the idol's downcast eyes. 'Now that's done with,' he said. 'If I could clear my own eyes as easily—but, oh, if I could have thought all that!' (He had come back to the Christabel again.)—'Green! I must be a hopeless case. No one can cure me. By Jove, though, if—if I see it as it really is now, I must *be* cured! But why—how?'

And he sat down, trembling violently. 'Good God! Nebelsen,' he said hoarsely, 'you were right after all—it's too horrible.'

'Never mindt,' said the Chela encouragingly, 'now that the spell is reversed. Besides, I bring you a goot tiding. I haf a gommunication from my revered Mahatma received. The Brother through whom it came found it this morning brecipitated in blue bencil upon his blotting-

bad, and sent it on at once to me. It points out the only way for you to remove out of all your troubles, but the way is luckily quite simple. I tolt you my Mahatma was a clefer man!'

Campion gave a little groan; but after swallowing the idol, he could hardly strain at a Mahatma. 'Well, what does *he* say?' he asked.

'I am going to read. I must tell you at beginning, his English is very fonny. Listen!'

'"Quite true," he begins, "the idol is the mechanism of most of your friend's sea of troubles, though your theory to account for it is the feeblest fiddle-faddle and stuff of a fat-witted beetle-head." (There is noding stiff at all about my dear old Mahatma.) "Only one who was a ninnyhammer and a goose-cap would suppose that an image could possibly be charged with electro-magnetism. As you have chosen to worry me about it, I tell you plainly that the only way out of the Gordian knot with which your friend is stuck in the mud"—(I gannot think where he gets all his words and phrases—nor can the Brother who sets them down) "is at once to return the idol to the hand from which it came. As for your idiotic——" (and then he writes some more in a friently way).'

'You see, it is simple and quite easy,' he concluded; 'only return the idol to the place you bought it at—you can do that perfectly well.'

'It happens to be a present,' said Campion.

'To the giver, then—that is bedder still!'

'It's impossible, I tell you, Nebelsen. If that's the

best suggestion your Mahatma can make, he might as well have left it alone.'

'But why? tell me why.'

'Isn't it obvious? How can I, if I believe—and, Heaven help me, I do believe—this cursed thing is able to injure those who cross its path, in some unaccountable way—how can I send it back to someone who thought sh-he was doing me a kindness in giving it?'

'But if the Mahatma says it is the only way,' put in the Chela.

'If it was the only way to save my soul, I hope I shouldn't do it. Just ask yourself, Nebelsen. How can I tell what infernal trick it may play if I do send it back? I couldn't be such a scoundrel to send it without a word of warning, and if I warn, would anyone in his senses take it in at all? No, your Mahatma may be a very learned person—but he doesn't seem to understand European notions.'

'It is true,' said the Chela, 'he does not know the world—not *this* world; he is not, as I always say, a practical man of business. I gonfess I do not understandt his advice hier—it does not seem at all equitable. I am afraid he has not given all his mindt to what to him is only an earthy trifle.'

'You mustn't disturb him again on my account. There's sure to be a way out of it somehow. We will find it together.'

'You will not do as the Mahatma advises?'

'Most certainly not!'

'Then I am sorry—but I cannot any more advise you.

I am his Chela, and whether he is right or wrong, I cannot ask for his wisdom and then act quite anoder way.'

'Is that occult etiquette?' said Campion, with a bitter smile. 'You throw up the case then? Very well, if you must leave me to fight that inf—that influential image all alone, I must see what I can do with it. I wish now, Nebelsen, you had left me in my ignorance—what was the good of opening my eyes if you mustn't do anything for me? I've lost all my nerve: look at my hand! I shall go mad if I think of this much longer. How can I believe in an idol?—and yet I do, and that's the worst of it! Don't stay and listen to my raving—you can't do any good. Go, Nebelsen, like a good chap, go and leave me—I can't say in peace—but go!'

And Nebelsen, not without much reluctance and compassion, went.

When Nebelsen had gone, Campion sat and stared at that uncanny idol of his with growing dismay; he did not know what to think about it. He was ashamed of believing that it could harm him, and yet his experiments had given him a sharp lesson.

In defiance of all reason, he must recognise that he had to deal with a mysterious force which was only too ready to avenge the least failure in respect to an absurd image; he had no theories about it—the idol might be a mere conductor, a sort of consecrated Leyden jar, or it might have a horrible life of its own. He only knew that when it was insulted it struck back, and generally below the belt.

It had remitted its last stroke, but there was small

comfort in that, when the unseen finger might touch him again at any time.

And he knew all this, and had no one to advise him. Nebelsen might not be remarkable for profound wisdom, but at least he understood these things: he had exposed the offender. Now he was gone, Campion could not even speak of his sufferings to anyone else, for who else would believe in them?

What was he to do? He might smash this idol; but he persuaded himself that he was prevented by his promise to Sybil; though, to tell the honest truth, the reason was that he was afraid to do anything of the kind.

As for sending it back to her, he was incapable of even thinking of such a thing. If Nebelsen's Mahatma knew anything, and it really desired to return to her hand, it could be for no good purpose, he was sure, and he would never allow this sinister shadow to touch his lost love if he could prevent it.

Suppose he were to get rid of it in some way? There was his unlucky promise, twice given. Of course Sybil, if she knew all, would in common humanity release him; but what would she think if he asked to be relieved? What reason could he give with the least plausibility? And if he did without her permission, and some day, as he had not even yet ceased to hope, they met again, would not one of her first questions be whether he still had her gift, and would not an answer in the negative be quite fatal?

At all events, he would do nothing for a little while; very likely there was some natural explanation after all.

For the average healthy-minded young Englishman will not go over to fetich-worship without a struggle, and Campion had moments of indignant revolt against the terror that haunted him.

And as he fell back again within its dominion, he began to wonder whether it would always be content with annoying, but still temporary, acts of vengeance, and direct its destructive power solely against his household effects. What if it were only toying with him, catlike, all this while, and reserving some tremendous doom as the finishing stroke?

It was an ugly thought, but he could not get rid of it; he was afraid at last to be alone in the studio with the idol, and went out for a restless stroll.

On his way back he passed a florist's, where he bought the most expensive flowers he could see in the window, and arranged them after his return in his rarest piece of pottery.

He called Bales, and told him to take them into the painting-room. 'Anywhere in particular?' Bales asked. 'No,' said Campion, with affected carelessness, 'it's of no consequence, it doesn't matter—at least' (and he showed a slight confusion here), 'now I come to think of it, you may put it on the carved cabinet, just in front of that Indian idol. Yes, put it there, Bales—nowhere else. And I shall dine out this evening.'

He came home late. Not even to himself would he acknowledge that he had determined to *soigner* his idol, if it was possible to do so and preserve any self-respect at all. 'I may try my hand at painting those flowers to-

morrow,' he had told himself, though he was not believed, 'and in the meanwhile—why the deuce *shouldn't* they be on that cabinet?'

But somehow, before he went to his bedroom he took a light into his studio, to assure himself that Bales had made no mistake about the flowers.

The flowers had evidently been placed on the cabinet; but now they lay scattered and crushed at its foot, and the pottery which had held them was broken into a hundred pieces; while the idol kept its usual place above, with something now, to Campion's excited fancy, of deadly and implacable hostility upon its glistening countenance.

As he stood there in the big painting-room, where all but that particular corner was lost in gloom, his flesh crept at the thought that this thing was not to be cajoled nor appeased by anything he could do—he had humbled himself for nothing—his offering was rejected with scorn.

And then, in the dead silence, with the shadows shooting and contracting about him as the light shook in his trembling hand, Campion, from some impulse he could not resist, spoke to this image.

'What do you want?' he said in a hoarse whisper. 'Only tell me that. Whatever you are—be reasonable.'

But the ugly thing gave no reply, no sign of relenting; and, disgusted with his own superstition, Campion went to bed in a state of stony despair.

The next morning he rose with a weary impatience of his surroundings; he felt that he ought to do something

to break the spell of horror, but he wanted resolution to deal summarily with his formidable incubus—his nerves were unstrung, and he felt ill and discouraged.

So when he found, with the cast which Perceval had sent according to promise, a note saying that he was going down to his houseboat that very day, and proposing that Campion should come with him at once, instead of waiting till Saturday, he welcomed this as a means of escaping from the idol and its vague suggestions of evil, and accepted eagerly.

Before he left Bales came up with a troubled countenance: 'About that there vawse of flowers, sir,' he began, 'I think you ought to be told——'

Campion stopped him. 'I know—I know,' he said hurriedly: 'it's all right. I—I had an accident with it last night.'

Who could have thought that he would sink to such Paganism as this? to lay offerings before a barbarous idol, and when it spurned them, actually to shield it at his own expense! Let no one imagine that Campion did not feel this degradation—he despised himself for it bitterly.

Bales's usually wooden face became quite a battle-ground for emotions. 'Oh, very well, sir, I'm sure,' was all he could manage to say; but when he was by himself, his perplexity found a vent.

'Now what indooced the governor to tell me that?' he asked himself. 'Can't say I see what he's up to at all. However, so long as *he's* satisfied, 'tain't none o' my business.'

And Campion had driven off with the thought that perhaps Bales had suspected or seen something. To have his miserable plight known to his servant would be intolerable, and Campion's sole comfort was in the recollection of Bales's systematic scepticism.

CHAPTER XI.

MYSTIFICATIONS.

AFTER one or two postponements, Mrs. Staniland's projected esoteric evening was actually about to come off. She had often exerted herself before for the benefit of struggling geniuses, to whom she had been of real assistance. Ill-natured people were apt to compare her benevolence to that of the fabled snark, which 'collects though it does not subscribe,' and it was perhaps true that her heart opened more readily than her purse. After all, money is not the only or the most valuable contribution in all cases, and even of money Mrs. Staniland could be liberal when she saw occasion.

But it was quite a new sensation to her to figure as the protectress of a rising faith, which might with a little timely assistance regenerate society, and she received her friends with deep satisfaction. 'I do think,' she assured several of them, 'that we are going to have a most interesting evening—dear Mr. Nebelsen hopes to be allowed to go quite beyond the usual phenomena.'

The rooms filled, and as the chariot-wheels which bore the hero of the evening still tarried, there was little to distinguish the gathering from an ordinary evening party. Young men stood talking, with the usual conviction that

it was uncommonly good of them to talk at all, down to the eager girl faces upturned to catch their utterances; here and there someone, with an evident pride in his social dexterity, would pick his tortuous way through the groups until he dropped into the conversational opening he desired, much as the marble in the game of nursery billiards zigzags down a maze of pins.

Everybody seemed to be talking at once at high pressure and full speed, and the effect at a short distance was painfully suggestive of the monkey-house; but there were the usual silent individuals without whom no social evening would be complete—the men who don't know a soul, and who are to be seen sometimes herding together for mutual encouragement, like cattle in wind; more often brooding apart in corners, wondering why they came, and eyeing one another with a furtive misanthropy.

There were the airy little greetings, which not unfrequently carried a hidden sting; and the gushing welcomes, intended least of all for the actual recipient; the slow beat of fans, and the restless shifting of crush hats.

The only distinguishing features were a certain suppressed excitement, and the fact that the talk ran everywhere in the same groove—the probable nature of the Chela's performances, concerning which there was much vague speculation.

'Mr. Babcock, come here and tell me all about this Herr Nebelsen,' said Mrs. Pontifex in her imperious matronly tones. 'What will it be like?—you've seen it before, I know.'

'Well, let me see,' said Babcock, 'If you can conceive

a cross between a rather clumsy foreign conjuror and a half-trained performing canary, you'll get a faint idea of the kind of thing.'

'Is it amusing, then?' inquired the lady solemnly.

'There's an element of quiet fun, without vulgarity, about it, certainly,' said Babcock. 'We must make him bring out his best miracles—we shall have you a full-blown Buddhist, Mrs. Pontifex, before the evening's over!'

He was passing on in the endeavour to reach the spot where Sybil stood, by one of the open windows, when he was again delayed, this time by little Mrs. Venham Honiton.

'Tell me, Mr. Babcock, isn't it getting fearfully late? I really don't think this prophet man can be coming now, if he ever meant to, for they're obliged of course to be very particular where they go just at starting, aren't they?—they can't go *everywhere*. It's a great disappointment to dear Mrs. Staniland, no doubt, after getting us all here to meet him; but perhaps she *was* a little too ready to take his acceptance for granted—don't you think so? I am so grieved about it!'

'Well, I wouldn't begin to despair yet,' said Babcock; 'I think he is pretty sure to turn up some time.'

'Ah!' said Mrs. Honiton admiringly, 'you are always so good-natured, and willing to look at the bright side; but I feel quite a conviction we shall not hear much Buddhism to-night. Yes, I see by your eyes you're as much struck as I was by that pale Elsworth girl—did you *ever* see anyone so gone off in your life?'

'Can't say I see any startling change for the worse,'

said Babcock, who was thinking Sybil looked particularly charming that evening.

'Well, a woman notices these things more perhaps. *I* see it. Not that I ever admired her, though some people, I dare say, called her pleasing once. I declare I'm getting quite good-natured in my old age.'

'Oh, you're a long way off *that* at present, don't you know,' said Babcock, not particularly caring in which sense she chose to apply his consolation; and then he made his escape, and worked his way by slow approach to where Sybil was standing with a girl friend, who was her inconveniently devoted admirer.

'Mr. Babcock, don't you call it too bad—this hard-hearted person here sternly refuses to prepare me for what we are to see?'

'But if I don't know myself!' protested Sybil.

'I can prepare you both,' said Babcock. 'There will be signs and wonders, astral shapes all over the room; we shan't see them, but we shall know they're here, because Nebelsen will tell us so. There will be elementary thought-reading, or rather spelling; and you must try and coax him to give us a portent that never fails to surprise and delight the young—the materialisation of an esoteric pudding in an astral hat.'

'Poor Mr. Nebelsen—he really believes in it all,' said Sybil.

'Well, he believes in himself,' said Babcock. 'But here comes the mystic man at last. Isn't he being mobbed, though? And he pretends he don't like it.'

Nebelsen was feeling a supreme exaltation at the pro-

spect of being at last allowed to unveil some of the mysteries of occultism to a larger assembly than he had ever yet addressed; the Brotherhood, through their representative, had withdrawn their opposition; he felt himself in so highly electrical a condition as to be capable of producing phenomena far more startling than any he had hitherto ventured upon.

Might he not, in this drawing-room, one of the resorts of frivolous fashion (it was nothing of the kind, but he knew no better), accomplish results which would bring all thoughtful London around him? Nothing was needed but courage and unlimited faith in himself.

'Really, dear Herr Nebelsen,' Mrs. Staniland was saying, 'I began to be afraid you had deserted me; but so long as you are here at last—and you know this is a great opportunity for you; some of the people here to-night would be real acquisitions to *any* religion, and quite open to conviction, too. As for me, I'm too old, you tell me, to change my views, but I take a great interest in your cause, for all that. And now, do tell me, is there anything you would like done by way of preparation? Should the room be darkened, or chairs moved, or anything? Please give your own directions.'

'Everything will do as at present quite well,' said the Chela. 'I shall only ask a leedle less talking from laties and schendlemen.'

Conversation, after two or three rebellious outbursts, was finally quelled. The Chela took up a position on the hearthrug, from which he contemplated his audience through moony spectacles with a gaze of dreamy emotion.

'Sybil darling,' whispered her friend, 'I'm getting so frightened! Will they turn out the lamps, do you think? You are so brave—do let me hold your hand.'

And Babcock too would have professed panic if he could have hoped to share the remedy.

The Chela had already started with a rapid and enthusiastic, though slightly incoherent harangue on the stupendous powers which were to be attained by the human will when guided and fortified by occult training. He discoursed upon these at such length that his hearers showed slight but unmistakable signs that their attention was wandering, though it took Nebelsen some time longer to discover that he was expected to 'cut the dialect and come to the 'osses.'

Then, by way of introduction to the more recondite mysteries, he obtained sharp double raps and silvery tinkles from unexpected quarters.

'It's quite dreadful!' cried Miss Tremlett. 'I don't believe it's *right*!'

It is quite possible, however, to overdo bell-sounds, and it must be owned that the Chela, in his artless pleasure at his own performances, produced them in profusion long after they had lost their first freshness; but the flagging interest was revived when he announced an intention of borrowing a cigarette.

'For even a student as myself,' said Nebelsen, taking a cigarette from the case someone had fetched from his overcoat—'even for myself, to disintegrate a thing, and afterwards to greate it exactly the same again, is noding at all. We haf only to restore it to the kosmic raw

material, and then again to evolve it. Somebody, please, will make his private mark on this cigarette?'

Pen and ink were procured, and a large cross and a couple of small blots marked upon the cigarette, which the Chela then held over the flame of a candle until it was burnt.

'In five minutes,' he said, 'if you will open the top of the piano I see in that other room, you will find there your cigarette.'

Now, it may be well here to make it clearly understood that there could be no possibility of collusion or substitution; the owner of the cigarette was a complete stranger to Nebelsen, nor had Nebelsen been in the house before that evening, while all present had seen the ink-marked cigarette slowly burning. The experiment, beyond all doubt, was perfectly genuine, and this, in the face of certain recent exposures, cannot be too much insisted upon.

As soon as the five minutes were up, there was a general movement towards the piano, the top of which Babcock raised amidst great excitement.

'Well?' said the Chela impatiently, as he stood on the hearthrug, 'why do you not take it out?'

'I think, do you know,' said Babcock blandly, 'we'd better give it another five minutes.'

'You need not be afraid,' said Nebelsen, with dignified contempt, 'he vill not bah-it you! Why, then, do you not take him out for all to see?'

'Well, I would,' said Babcock, 'only it's a very singular thing; but he ain't there!'

'Not at all singular,' retorted the Chela, with some temper, 'when you are there, diffusing a garnal and gross influence by which the magnetic gurrents must totally disorganised be! If you will only allow Mees Elsvort to go near the piano, the cigarette will be able in peace to regonstruct himself.'

Babcock shrugged his shoulders, and retired with sentiments the reverse of amiable at this public reproof, and Sybil, not best pleased at being thus singled out, approached the instrument and looked in. 'Really,' she said at last, 'I can't see anything either.'

'No,' said the Chela, who did not seem particularly abashed. 'I am going to dell you why; the phenomenon has failed simply begause the cigarette was not with my own bersonal magnetism sufficiently imbregnated. I made too great hurry to destroy it; I ought to have kept it upon me a longer time.'

('Up his sleeve,' suggested Babcock, under his breath.) 'But nevere mindt, it has noding to say; we vill try again once more.'

But Mrs. Staniland, perhaps from doubt whether cigarettes were likely to improve the tone of her piano, intervened here: 'Oh no, dear Herr Nebelsen, you mustn't trouble to do it all over again. You see, we all quite understand the process. I think we would rather see some other phenomenon, if you don't mind.'

'Anoder! You are still not satisfied! Do not be frightened, anybody, but there is one of the Broderhood hier in astral form upon the balgony. Now we shall be able to have a very gurious and beautiful manifestation!

Perhaps this lady who is opposite' (and he bowed to Mrs. Pontifex) 'will be so gracious to think of zomthing she has long ago lost and would be joyful to see again?'

'Don't you hope she'll ask for her *figure*?' whispered Mrs. Venham Honiton; but Mrs. Pontifex was so fortunate as to be able to remember nothing, and the Chela appealed to the company generally, who, from a mean dread of being compromised as witnesses, avoided his eye with singular unanimity.

At last an elaborately dishevelled lady, with a sad smile and a low *traînante* voice: said, 'When I was quite a child I had a possession I dearly, dearly loved—a poor old doll with no legs and arms and no features—just an ordinary ninepin it was, but it was almost the only thing I cared for in the world! Do you know, I have so often wished I could see its poor old round head and long neck once more!'

There was a touch of pathos about this that touched all with any tendency to sentiment. The Chela himself was charmed by the simplicity and poetry of the request, which he readily undertook to gratify.

For some minutes he stood with folded arms, absorbed and silent, with his eyes bent on one of the open windows. At length he came out of his reverie with a start: 'If you will look inside the chair upon which you are sitting, there will your long-lost ninepin be,' he said.

The lady started up with a cry of rapture: 'How *can* I thank you!' and then she gave a pretty little moan of dismay. 'But—*inside* the chair! Oh, Mrs. Staniland,

may I, *may* I have it cut open? I'm a selfish wretch, I know; but I should so like to see my poor old plaything once more!'

'Oh, my dear,' said Mrs. Staniland, 'how can you wait to ask? Cut it open by all means.'

It was a large armchair, very luxuriously padded, and when the crétonne covering was removed it revealed a richly brocaded stuff, imitated from an old pattern; this was slit up with as little damage as possible, and a white lining appeared underneath, which was also cut open; the condition of each covering proving conclusively that it could not have been tampered with, for the stitches were strong and the material still unfrayed.

The excitement reached a climax; the floor was gradually strewn with horsehair and flock from the disembowelled chair, which began to present a limp and emaciated appearance; but nowhere in its recesses was the interesting ninepin.

'Are you sure it's not in one of the *poufs*?' asked Mrs. Honiton, with questionable good faith.

'I don't think Mrs. Staniland would like all her chairs opened, like oysters, don't you know,' remonstrated Babcock.

'Particularly for such a very problematical pearl.'

'Well, perhaps not,' was the rejoinder. 'But how warm the poor man's getting—I quite feel for him!'

'I am sorry,' the Chela confessed, with his first approach to confusion, 'but hier, among so many indifferent or opposing individualities, I gannot goncentrate my will power upon a gommon ninepin. If I gontinue till morn-

ing light I shall do noding; nevare, nevare. And the Broder out on the balgony is gone away!'

This statement was received in chilling silence, broken by a few dry coughs; Mrs. Honiton, who had just refurnished her drawing-room, decided that it was not expedient to have the Chela at her own house, and Mrs. Staniland already regretted that she had allowed hers to be the scene of such a *fiasco*.

'Perhaps,' suggested Babcock, 'your Mahatma might do something for you if you ask him?'

The Chela seemed struck by an idea. 'Now listen,' he said half-aloud. 'My Mahatma is far away in Thibet: don't you think that if I write to him and get a ledder back hier in this room, those people will beleaf?'

'Not a doubt of it,' said Babcock. 'Capital notion! How will it come?'

'It will fludder from the ceiling down,' said the Chela.

'I want you all to have still patience,' he said, addressing the assembly. 'I am going to write to my Mahatma in Thibet, and you shall see the answer when it arrives, and hear also what he has to say.'

Babcock conducted him to a small writing-cabinet, where the Chela hastily scribbled a few lines. 'I shall next place it on a magnetic gurrent, and it will instantly to Thibet transported be,' he explained as he stepped out upon the balcony and stood there, holding out his mystic billet in the warm starlit stillness.

In spite of themselves, the majority were impressed by the sight of the tall strangely attired figure standing silent there, and there was a murmur of approbation when

he re-entered, saying quietly, 'It is gone, and now, until the ledder arrive, berhaps some laty will a liddle song sing?'

Someone sang 'Good-bye,' and after the applause had subsided, the Chela said excitedly, 'the ledder will be soon hier, in anoder minute!'

'Sharp work to and from Thibet in ten minutes!' said Babcock.

'There is no time and no space for the true adept,' answered Nebelsen; but the anxiously awaited letter unaccountably declined to deliver itself. 'If somebody would again upon the biano blay?' the Chela suggested at last, feeling himself very much in the situation of the priests whom Baal so ungratefully left in a sacerdotal lurch.

But at last, when the general attention was despairingly directed to the performer who was just sitting down at the piano, a sudden exclamation from Babcock startled the room, and all eyes perceived a pink cocked hat note slowly sailing down from the ceiling and drifting towards the Chela's feet.

In the reaction which followed all gathered eagerly round him, while, with flushed face and triumphant smile, he picked up the mysterious missive. 'I tolt you,' he said proudly, 'the Mahatma has vindicated the cause by sending to you this greeting,' and he reverently unfolded the cocked hat and began to read the contents to himself.

Many who had remained sceptical and unmoved through all the preceding marvels began to waver now,

and on all sides there was a consuming anxiety to hear what the Mahatma had to say. It was not gratified.

Nebelsen, after studying the note with a confused and angry face, crushed it in his hand and thrust it into his sash.

'But mayn't we look?' cried Mrs. Honiton. 'I should so love to see what an occult note looks like?'

'I am not able to gommunicate the gontents,' said the Chela.

'Too tremendous for our weak minds to grasp?' inquired Babcock.

'Quite right,' was the answer; 'to read it aloud would not be of advantage, and after this I do not think I shall succeed in obtaining any more results this evening.'

The announcement brought back the former frost in increased severity; eyebrows were significantly lifted, and smiles of private incredulity freely indulged in. Nobody had a good word to say for a faith which was not even able to entertain them for a single evening.

Mrs. Staniland began to send people downstairs where a light supper had been provided. 'You never touch supper, I know, Herr Nebelsen,' she said as she passed him

'To-night, yes,' he replied.

'Oh, then, perhaps you will take someone down by-and-by?' she said, with a marked contrast to the distinction she had shown him earlier in the evening, and left him standing, humbled, but patient, in the emptying room, where he aroused Sybil's compassion.

'I mustn't—till I've seen everybody else go,' she said to Babcock, who was hoping to secure her as his com-

panion. 'Nobody has asked that pretty Miss Chatterton; come with me and be introduced.' When she had got rid of him thus, and only a few scattered couples were left, she went up to Nebelsen. 'Will you be very good and take me down for some supper?' she said. 'Not now, it's crowded, and it will be pleasanter out on the balcony.'

She stepped outside, and he followed with reverential submission. When they were both seated, Sybil made some ordinary remark; but he was so long silent that she began to feel uncomfortable.

At last he spoke. 'I haf seddled in my mind to renounce my Mahatma,' he said, glancing at her to see how she took this tremendous piece of information.

'Have you?' said Sybil, feeling, in spite of her sympathy, a very strong inclination to laugh. 'Why?'

'Begause,' said Nebelsen vehemently, 'he is so imbolite, he does not know how to behafe. In Thibet they are—well, not schendlemen, and a long time I haf borne it batiently. But to-night it is too much. I drusted all to him—and he leaf me quide alone! Other chelas of less standing are assisted to make manifestations, but for me there is noding done. So from to-night I will no longer a chela be—I chuck up.'

'I'm so glad,' said Sybil. 'I think it's so sensible of you.'

'You do? And you are glad that I renounce? Ah, you do not know how happy you make me when you say that!'

'And don't you believe in Theosophy any more?'

'I beleaf the same as ever—yes. That to-night I obtained only a few phenomena makes noding—it is not

ungommon that the will-bower and magnetic currents will not work: there will be agsidents and breakdowns—shust as on a railway line. And, as you saw, there *did* arrive the ledder from my Mahatma.'

'But you wouldn't show it to us, you know.'

'That is where my Mahatma was so ingonsiderate. He wride me a ledder, but he take care that I should be unable to show it or read it. I will tell you, so that you will see how insulting he can make himself. When I open the note I see in Greek characters, and forgif me that I rebeat such worts to you at all, but I see written there—"*Do not a damfool be!*"'

Sybil was obliged to caress her lips somewhat assiduously with the feathery head of her fan before she could express her indignation with becoming gravity.

'After that, you know, there must an end com. And so to-night I shall wride him a formal resignation. He has never taken any pains when I gonsult him. Sometimes he never answers one wort; sometimes the answer when it comes, is—well, it is not moch. I will tell you one instance. There is a young frient of mine a bainter—but you know him, he made that bad bicture of you in the galerie—he is named Campion.'

'Well?' said Sybil, suddenly serious.

'Well, for seferal weeks he is very unlucky—altogether, as you say, off his golours. He lose his name, his frients, and his money and his work; he is ill, he worries, and he cannot tell why; and all the time he never guessed till I tolt him that it was all caused by one leedle ogly idol.'

'And when you told him,' said Sybil, 'did he believe it?'

'At first—no; but in the end—yes, as moch almost as I. And this will show you what my Mahatma is like—I write to ask him what is the best thing for Mr. Campion to do, and he reblies that the only way is to send the idol back to the giver! and that is shust the one thing which Mr. Campion will not do.'

'Why?' asked Sybil, shocked that Ronald could put any faith in such an extravagant explanation, and hoping to find he was less credulous than Nebelsen seemed to believe.

'Because he says it would be cowardly and selfish, and I gonfess he is quite right, and the Mahatma has made a grand moral mistake to gif such advice at all. No matter, now; once more, I shall be able myself to help Mr. Campion!'

'Herr Nebelsen,' said Sybil earnestly, 'I don't think you ought to encourage him in these morbid fancies—I beg your pardon, but how can I speak of them as anything else? You can't seriously believe yourself that an idol can have any sort of power!'

'Exactly the same as Mr. Campion say at first. But let me tell you how he was convinced,' and he gave her an account of the experiment with the red paint, and its sequel.

'And is he afraid now?'

'When I see him last he was derribly afrait, and I cannot help thinking that unless somthing is soon done

that idol will do a moch worse act. Till now he plays the Poltergeist, but that cannot always continue.'

Sybil gave a little shiver. 'I wish you hadn't told me all this,' she said. 'And now let us go in.'

Nebelsen strengthened his intended apostasy that evening both by lobster salad and champagne, and his heart was strangely light as he trudged home, firmly resolved upon renouncing his Mahatma before he went to bed.

And yet, for a Chela thus to cut himself adrift from his esoteric guide is a step whose tremendous importance needs no demonstration. Why, then, did Nebelsen turn his back on the dazzling vista of pure spirituality and omniscience, towards which he had been struggling so long, in sudden disgust at a discipline that might be supposed to have grown familiar? How could he give up all with scarcely a regret?

Alas for the weakness of human nature, which is not to be expelled by the esoteric fork! The advantages of his guru's counsel, the prospect of initiation, of Nirvâna itself, all had become as nothing to the infatuated Chela in comparison with a pair of grey eyes and a sweet piquant face. For years he had allowed his heart to float far above in the vague immensity—only to haul it in at last like a kite, and lay it at the feet of a girl.

CHAPTER XII.

FOR OLD SAKE'S SAKE.

As Sybil thought over Nebelsen's revelations, she found it difficult wholly to resist the impression they made upon her. They had aroused the superstition which, in spite of education, is more or less latent in so many of us.

What if this wild story were really true? She could not forget all she had been told when she first bought that most ill-chosen gift. Had not misfortune attended all who had had anything to do with it? The man who dug it up, the ship which brought it over, the curiosity dealer himself.

And then there was her own experience. It had been the means of betraying her to her aunt at the worst possible moment, and so separating her from Ronald, who otherwise would never have had reason to doubt her so unjustly. He had used this idol to point the insult of that cruel portrait!

She was afraid to let herself think of all this; she would not believe it. The really dreadful thing was that *Ronald* should believe, and be unhinged by it.

Yes, if Nebelsen was to be trusted, Ronald was convinced there was some dangerous force in this mysterious

image. He had been told that he might escape if he were only to return it to her, and yet he refused. It was terrible that his strong intellect should be so thrown off its balance; but she was touched at the same time by his refusal to shift his supposed danger to herself. Surely he could not be altogether bad after all—he still cared for her.

But the constant sight of this idol was evidently having a bad effect upon his imagination, distempered by ill-health or overwork, or some such cause, and perhaps she was in some way accountable for these gloomy fancies of his.

Was it not she who had insisted upon his keeping it by him, and could she leave him to fall more and more under his gloomy delusion, when, by a little sacrifice of her pride, she might restore him to a more healthy state of mind?

She had only to insist upon taking the idol back, and when he saw that nothing alarming happened to her, he would be cured of his morbid fancies. Perhaps Nebelsen's Mahatma, whoever he might be, was right in this at least.

Impulsive Sybil no sooner conceived this resolve than she was impatient to carry it out. She must save Ronald, and if—well, if there was anything dreadful about the idol, as to which she could not reason away all her terrors, —it was only just that she should bear the brunt of its inexplicable malice.

The following day was Sunday, and as the afternoon drew on, Miss Sybil, who was accustomed to restrict her devotions to the morning service, astonished her aunt by

announcing that she was going to church again that evening.

Mrs. Staniland, as Sybil had anticipated, did not propose to accompany her, but sent one of the housemaids, who attended in the worst of tempers, having made other plans for spending the evening.

The church was a very short distance from Romanoff Road, and the service was over before the light had begun to fail. As they came out, Sybil told the maid as indifferently as she could that she wanted to call at Mr. Campion's studio for something she had left there.

Sybil knew she was going to do a rather unconventional thing. There was no need even for her to go in person, she could have sent someone perfectly well.

But she was anxious about Ronald's condition; she wanted to see him herself, and form her own opinion as to his state of mind. Besides, he would probably refuse to give the idol up unless she made him understand that he must do so.

She could not help shrinking from the possible results of receiving back this thing, which might after all bring ill-luck with it. But that must be all nonsense—and at the worst, at the first sign of anything at all sinister, she could always get rid of the suspected one, whereas poor Ronald would probably feel hampered by his engagement to keep it.

And she was supported by a secret excitement: she was about to see him again—her dread of supernatural powers, her pride were alike powerless to prevail against that thought, and her heart fluttered from other causes than

fear, as she walked on with the sulky Louisa, past the little gardens, fragrant with lilac and privet, towards the house where Campion lived and worked.

Romanoff Road looked more Arcadian than ever in the warm Sabbath stillness, and under a sky which was just beginning to melt from throbbing blue to a luminous green. There was no one to be seen except a pair of *endimanchés* lovers parting at a corner, and the lamplighter beginning his rounds at the end of a turning.

And now Sybil was at the studio door, and it seemed to her that someone was within. Ronald often sat and smoked there, she knew, in the evenings.

She had Louisa as *chaperon*, or rather duenna, but she began to wish she had not come, and to hesitate. Suppose Ronald's man or a model were to come to the door, what should she say?

Her hand was already on the bell, when from within a peal of laughter rang out on the silence, and she shrank back terrified.

For it was laughter that conveyed an insult, full of coarse triumph and cynical mockery, and yet—it was like Ronald's laughter, as it might become after some sad deterioration.

She turned to the maid with a white face and startled eyes: 'I—I don't think I will go in just now after all, Louisa. Mr. Campion seems engaged.'

'Just as you think best, Miss, I'm sure,' said Louisa primly, and they went back to Sussex Place.

Had Ronald seen her coming? Did he fancy she came because she still—— No, even he could not be so worthless

as to think that! But all that story about the idol must have been a hoax, or an attempt to work upon her feelings, and she had believed it, and that was why he laughed in that hateful way!

Well, she could let him know that she was not such a dupe as he imagined, and if, as she could easily understand, he really wanted to part with the idol, why she cared far too little to think of preventing him.

On his return to his lodgings, which were in a quiet street in Paddington, Nebelsen set about the business of repudiating his Mahatma. It took him some hours to compose a document which should strike a poignant remorse into his guru's unsympathetic bosom, but he finished it at last. 'I will not send it by Babu Chowkydaree Loll,' he reflected, 'because he will want to talk and to argue, and induce me to retract, and I do not wish to retract. I will despatch it to the Mahatma myself by occult means. He will get it quite as soon.'

And then his pupilage was over, the vision of transcendent knowledge and power faded, he could no longer flatter himself with the secret consciousness of superiority to the rest of mankind; he had deliberately reduced himself to their level.

But for the next few days he enjoyed an inexpressible relief; the vaguely tremendous tests which would try his nerve and knowledge to the utmost, loomed before him no more; he need not now repress the softer feelings and mortify his flesh; he could be as sentimental as his heart desired—and he was.

Not that he had forgotten Campion and his affairs al-

together: on the contrary, he was anxious to help him now that he was no longer hampered by his Mahatma.

And by frequent study of the message which had been 'precipitated' by means of the Babu, Nebelsen had arrived at a new reading, which supplied a solution at once more practicable and more equitable than the first, and put the Master's judgment in a better light.

He was so delighted at his own ingenuity, that he determined to go to Campion at once and impart his discovery, but, while he was preparing to do so, there came a sharp rap at his door, and the painter entered.

'You com at a goot time,' said Nebelsen cheerfully.

Campion said nothing; he only stood and looked. Possibly he was struck by the change in the mystic's appearance, for the ex-Chela had returned to the garb of ordinary citizens, and had sacrificed his curls and the greater part of his beard, leaving his ochre-coloured hair short and rather spiky. He had destroyed his own picturesqueness without even attaining the conventionality such a sacrifice deserved.

'Ach!' he said, 'I forget—you haf not seen me since I renounced the Mahatma.'

'No,' said Campion, 'and I wish to Heaven I had never seen you before! When did I ask you to interfere between Miss Elsworth and myself? Read that—I found it when I came back to town last night.'

He tossed a note on the table before Nebelsen, who read:

'"I don't know what object you may have had in trying to induce me, through Mr. Nebelsen, to take back

my present, but I am sure now that it was not a very creditable one. I shall not ask you to return the idol because, if you don't want it yourself, I want it even less. If you really think yourself still bound by what I was so foolish as to make you promise, of course you are nothing of the kind, and are quite at liberty to get rid of it by all means, as soon as ever you please!"'

'I do not understandt,' said Nebelsen, as he laid it down.

'Then I'll explain. You've been talking to her, and by some infernal blundering or other made her think I was asking her to take that idol back!'

'But why should she take it back?'

'You've read the letter; it was her present to me when we were engaged. She made me promise never to part with it.'

'Mees Elsvort gif you that idol? You are engage—betroth to her,' repeated the Chela blankly. It came upon him with a terrible shock; he scarcely knew till then how far his hopes had gone.

'Not now, it was broken off some time since' (the Chela's dream re-formed itself, like the severed sylph in the 'Rape of the Lock'), 'but I still hoped, till I read that. Thanks to you, it's all over this time!'

'But let me tell you this—it is about your idol,' Nebelsen broke in, 'I haf shust disgovered there has been a leedle misdake——'

'It was more than a little mistake when you took upon yourself to mention my affairs to Miss Elsworth. I was going to write to her, but you have put an end to all that.

Now after this, Nebelsen, I'll trouble you to leave me to manage my own business.'

'I say only this: the real advice that my Mahatma wrote——'

'I don't care to know it. I wish I had never been idiot enough to confide in you,' said the angry Campion; 'you've done more harm by your meddling and muddling than that miserable idol could if it was everything you say it is. And I've had enough of it. I am free to turn that thing loose as soon as I please, now, and I can do that without anybody's assistance. And in future, perhaps, you'll be kind enough not to interfere.'

The poor Chela was deeply hurt; he had meant to serve Campion; he did not even yet quite understand how he had offended, so that he could offer no defence. But, as Campion concluded, Nebelsen's pride and anger were kindled at last. He had meant till then to give the painter the benefit of his latest discovery, but if he would not be warned, why, after all, it was no longer any business of his.

Why should he take any further interest in maintaining the credit of Theosophy? If the Mahatma allowed himself to blunder, he might correct his errors for himself —it was Karma.

So his eyes blazed red like a hungry dog's as he said, heatedly, 'You are ungrateful, and a pighead. Certainly, I do not any more drouble myself with you. You haf refused to listen to what I dry to say. Very well, I shall not again speak. I vash my hands at you.'

When the interview was over it is only too much to

be feared that Nebelsen was rather relieved than otherwise that his hitherto unsuspected rival had refused all warning. He could safely trust the idol, he thought, to dispose of all Campion's pretensions for the future. From which reflections it may appear that the ex-Chela had already somewhat deteriorated from the lofty and passionless standard of thorough-going theosophy.

Campion, too, was not dissatisfied with the result of his visit. He had freed his mind, and disembarrassed himself of the muddle-headed mysticism in which he was ashamed of having placed such little confidence as he had felt.

The next thing to be done was to get rid of the idol, as he now felt himself at liberty to do. He was beginning to feel less superstitious about it; its behaviour had, so far as he knew, been most exemplary since he had been away up the Thames, and he had almost argued himself out of the notion that it could possess any sort of intelligence, but for all that he was determined not to have it about him any longer.

It had such painful associations; it was in the way in his painting room; it was so infernally ugly. He had innumerable most excellent reasons for his resolution, and he was quite certain that anything like alarm or apprehension was not amongst them.

One would think it was easy enough to dispose of a superfluous ornament or curiosity, but in this case there were difficulties. For reasons he would not admit, even to himself, Campion did not attempt to destroy his idol, nor could he conscientiously bestow it upon a friend, or

even press it upon some passing stranger. Perhaps it was some lingering regard for the Mahatma's suggestion that inspired him to take the idol up to Hanway Street, find the old man who had sold it to Sybil, and see if he could not be induced to take it back.

There was an old man in one of the curiosity shops there, but he flatly denied having sold the idol, though Campion rightly or wrongly suspected from his look that he had seen it before. He declined to purchase on the plea that idols were 'dull,' and there was no demand at all for them.

At another shop, Campion offered the idol at so low a price that it was declined with a promptness that seemed due to a doubt whether it had been honestly come by.

That was unpleasant, and at the next place he asked an extravagant sum, enlarging upon the rarity and workmanship of the Indian effigy in such terms that the proprietor said he could not think of depriving him of such a treasure. He then gave up Hanway Street and crossed to Wardour Street, where he made some futile attempts to leave it to be disposed of on commission. No one would give it house-room.

He was beginning to grow tired of carrying this most unmarketable idol about London, when at last, towards dusk, he passed a pawnbroker's, a seedy little shop near Paddington Green, which seemed as if it could not be very exclusive.

No one was near; he was not likely to meet any acquaintances in that neighbourhood, and Campion slipped through the swinging door at the back and, after a little

bargaining to save appearances, was accommodated with a trifling advance, and came out again with a sigh of relief.

Then for the first time that afternoon he began to doubt whether he was justified in circulating such a solidified curse; was it not almost as bad as selling a dog with a suspicion that it was sickening for hydrophobia? This made him very uneasy until he had persuaded himself that the cases were altogether different. He would not have let Sybil take it to save his life, but that was from his desire to shield her from the remotest possibility of a danger, which (with the single exception of himself and the Chela) there was probably hardly a person in England who would not laugh to scorn. Indeed, now that the idol was out of his hands, he began to disbelieve in it again himself.

Yet, perhaps he was not sorry to find that he had mislaid the pawnticket, and thus was protected from any temptation to return and redeem the dangerous pledge. The search which he made for the missing ticket was neither long nor vigorous.

A day and a half passed in delightful immunity. Campion's spirits rose now this weight was removed, and he was thinking rather contemptuously of the Chela's blundering attempts to solve a problem which was so obvious and simple, when a note was brought him in an unfamiliar handwriting.

The letter was apparently the production of one who in his kindest actions always contrived to protect himself against a too-exuberant gratitude.

It began by stating that the writer, who remained anonymous, was unknown to Campion, but had followed his career with interest, and had been shocked to discover the straits to which an artist of such promise and talent was evidently reduced. Thinking that the article with which he had been compelled to part was very probably endeared to Mr. Campion by association, the writer felt sincere pleasure in restoring it to him, which the fortunate discovery of the pawnticket bearing his name and address enabled him to do. All he asked in return was that Campion should in future do his best, by amending his ways, to avoid such degrading necessity.

Campion, with a dismal prevision of what was coming undid the parcel, and the idol, looking more cheerful than ever, rolled out of it.

It was kindly meant, no doubt, but it was a mistake for all that—a liberty which Campion characterised in his strongest language. As it happened, he was so unused to any transactions with pawnbrokers that it had never occurred to him to give a false name and address, he had merely thought of depositing the idol and getting away as soon as possible, and had not time to invent precautions.

However, that piece of carelessness, followed by the dropping of the ticket, had given this officious stranger the necessary clue, and all the business of freeing himself from the disgustful piece of *bric-à-brac* must be gone through over again. This time he decided not to try to sell or pawn the image—after all, it was possibly selfish, he now saw, and certainly undignified. He would simply

lose it, and then no one would be compelled to have any connection with it, and his conscience would be clear.

He was determined not to let another night pass with such a thing in his house, and he got into the Park that evening shortly before the gates closed, bearing the idol under the cape of his coat. Near the ornamental water he found an empty seat, the very seat where he had sat with Sybil when she had first told him of her gift. Here Campion abandoned his idol, and fled guiltily.

But, as he was letting himself into the studio, he felt a touch at his sleeve, and looking round saw that he had been followed by a Chinaman. He had probably been attached to the Chinese Court at the Health Exhibition, or else engaged as an interpreter at the police courts, for he spoke English.

'How do, John?' he said, with a nod of friendly familiarity.

'How are *you*?' said Campion, 'who are you, and what do you want?'

'Found your joss, John, all lite,' and to Campion's unmitigated disgust, his Oriental friend produced the irrepressible idol.

'How do you know it's mine?' asked Campion, but the Chinaman only grinned and nodded.

'John knew,' was all he would condescend to explain, 'and John poor, velly poor, give John tea for bringing back joss.' (He had a bewildering way of using 'John' to denote both the first and second persons.)

'Confound you!' said Campion angrily; and then, remembering that it was not the Chinaman's fault, he added,

'Of course I'm much obliged to you—and all that, but the thing is of no further use to me—do you understand? You may keep it, if you like. I daresay you're more accustomed to the care of idols than I am—take it home, worship it, make it happier than ever I did—do you see, it's for *you*!'

The Chinaman, however, did not seem at all disposed to profit by Campion's munificence. 'John Clistian, no heathen,' he explained proudly, 'not my piecey joss.'

He deposited it on the doorstep of the studio, and spread out his hands in abnegation.

'Give John tea,' he repeated.

Evidently the converted Chinaman entertained a secret awe of the pagan symbol, and would have none of it. He did not actually propose to join Campion at the tea table, as his request seemed to imply; that was merely a euphemism of his for money; and when this was understood and acted upon, he soon took his departure and vanished in the summer dusk.

Campion carried his idol into the painting room, with a groan of resignation, and set it in its familiar place on the cabinet. It might be only another series of coincidences, but for all that, though he was not nearly so inclined as he had been to credit the idol with large supernatural powers, he did not like the persistency with which it returned, time after time, to his roof. It seemed so very much as if it really was actuated by some semi-intelligent design.

'I suppose I must keep it here to-night,' he said, feeling utterly helpless; and inwardly resolved schemes for

the morrow. He was agreeably surprised the next morning to find that the idol had refrained from any further demonstrations during the night; it is true that there were more than the usual number of bills and one county court summons on his breakfast table, but he could hardly believe the idol adaptive enough to make use of such weapons.

No, it was apparently on its best behaviour, in the hope of being allowed to stay; but that could not be; not again would he expose himself to a demoralising dread. Harmless or potent, the thing must go, and this time no one should have a chance of assisting it to find him again!

He had meant to wait till nightfall before carrying out his plan, but after painting all the morning, he felt so giddy and confused that he determined to get the deed done while he was still capable of action. He placed the idol inside a small leather bag and strapped it down, after which he walked out with his burden towards North Bank.

It was a lovely afternoon, so hot that the warm air felt like a caress, and as Campion leaned over the parapet of the canal bridge, he enjoyed full possession of his faculties again, and only waited to be quite secure from observation before executing his purpose; for the spectacle of a well-dressed young man deliberately casting a bag into a canal might attract notice, and even suspicion.

Very few people were about, however; the children were all at home lying down after their dinners, no carriages had yet appeared in the drive, only one errand-

boy loitered by the palings, and he had his back turned, and no barge glided through the oily-green water under the hanging foliage. A universal *siesta* seemed to obtain in that non-commercial region.

Now was his time. It was horribly like drowning a kitten, but he let the bag fall as if by accident, and saw it sink with a sullen splash. Then, as the last ripple radiated from the place it had struck and spread to either bank, he turned away, with a sigh of relief.

He had done it at last. If the idol had been capable of understanding its situation, it would surely have made some resistance before submitting to be confined in a watery prison, like the Djinn Solomon sealed up in the coffer.

Somehow he did not feel inclined to risk a return of his headache by going back to his hot studio, with the sickly smell of paints and mastic, and he turned into the park, thinking he might pass away the afternoon there; but the lake reflected a dazzling glare, and the turf was dotted with basking tramps, and in the shade under the trees he was haunted by torturing memories of his lost love.

He did not stay long there, and, as he turned into Marylebone, a passing omnibus carrying an advertisement of the Military Tournament at Islington, suggested a method of killing time, and so it came about that an hour or so later he was underneath the gallery which surrounds the Agricultural Hall, picking his way through the dim and narrow space filled with a motley crowd of masked and leather-jacketed competitors, lifeguardsmen, looking un-

familiar to civilian eyes, in caps, shell-jackets, and white buckskins; artillery guns, harnessed and unharnessed, and policemen. From above and all around rolled thunders of applause, but nothing could be seen until he came to a large gangway, through which he looked up the vast hall with its chocolate plain vanishing in a haze of light, above which rose dim tiers of heads, and the blue panes of the crudely-tinted arch of glass and iron.

In the arena the artillery contest was just finishing, and the winning team was driving round at the gallop, deftly shaving the posts, and ploughing up the tan in brown spurts at all the corners; he stood at the gangway for a time, watching the brightly touched uniforms, the glancing coats of the horses, and the lead-coloured gun, as they flashed in and out of the broad shafts of light.

He was moving away, when he fancied he saw in the stream of people who were passing him, the face which was never long out of his thoughts; it was only for a second, and then there was a cry that the team was coming out, and an order to stand back from the gangway.

The warning was promptly obeyed; the crowd divided, hastily retreating to a safe distance, with the single exception of a girl who did not seem to have heard the order, or understand what was coming. There she stood, alone in the opening, looking dreamily back as if in search of someone, and close upon her, the team was bearing down, while, owing to the sharpness of the corner, the officer in command would see nothing till too late.

And the girl, as Campion saw at once with a thrill of

horror, was Sybil Elsworth! He called to her to stand back; nobody else seemed to have eyes for her danger till then, when a general shout was raised.

Whether she was confused by that, or by a mutual recognition, or her deadly peril, could not be known, but she advanced with uncertain steps into yet more direct danger, and then stopped, fascinated by fear, and evidently powerless to move a step.

Campion brushed aside some bystanders who stood in his way, and rushing out into the open space, caught her and drew her back, just as the heavy gun swept by with the rattle of gear and clank of metal through the gangway, and pulled up sharp some yards beyond the spot where Sybil had been standing . . . another second—and, well as the team was handled—nothing could have saved Sybil from a sudden and terrible death.

He kept his arm round her, and, if at first she seemed inclined to reject the support, she submitted after one quick side-glance at his face, which was softened by a reverent joy, though the shadow of his recent horror still lingered upon it.

And the stream of people moved on backwards and forwards, and few knew how nearly they had missed assisting at a tragedy; in fact, no one took any further notice except a military-looking man, who came up immediately in the greatest anxiety, and he had the excuse of being Sybil's father.

'Good God!' he said, 'it was the nearest thing—I saw it all, and was coming as well as I could in that crush. You would have been killed before I could get anywhere

near you, but for this gentleman—why, you *know* him?' he broke off, as if suddenly enlightened by something in her expression.

'Can't you guess who it is, papa?' said Sybil, with the faintest smile; and a light broke over the Colonel's face as he shook Campion's disengaged hand with fervour.

'Why, to be sure!' he cried, 'of course—to think we should have met like this. Well, my little girl, under Providence' (he jerked this in as a kind of safeguard) 'owes her life to you. I was just taking her down for a cup of tea, and we got separated somehow, and the next time I saw her she was—well, we won't talk about it. Couldn't have made your acquaintance at a better moment! And now,' added the Colonel, with a sly chuckle at his own tact and penetration, 'I had better go back and tell my sister where you are, eh? You take her somewhere for a good strong cup of tea, and that will put her all right again. Sybil will tell you where to find us afterwards.'

And, before either Ronald or Sybil could say a word, the Colonel had gone off and left them together. Sybil could stand and walk without assistance now, and was little the worse for the shock. She drew away slightly and stood looking at him from under her long eyelashes, as if she expected him to speak.

'Sybil,' said Campion, 'I suppose I ought to say—Miss Elsworth—it's not my fault that I'm forced upon you in this way—you must admit that.'

'Is it very painful for you?' she said, half amused and half wistful.

'Tell me what you wish me to do, Sybil.'

'You were told to take me somewhere where there was tea,' she said meekly.

A wild incredulous joy seized Campion at her words, for he saw clearly that, for some reason, she was angry with him no longer.

And leaving the reunited pair at this stage, the story must go back for a few moments, if only to account for the Colonel's singular complaisance.

He had only returned from India within the last two days, and Mrs. Staniland had insisted upon his coming with them that afternoon; she had taken four seats, two of them at some distance from the others, and the fourth seat was to be occupied by Lionel Babcock.

For the time had come, in her opinion, when Babcock might propose to Sybil with perfect confidence, and, Mrs. Staniland, being an old lady who liked her own way even in details, had arranged that her niece should be won in the course of this particular afternoon, and in some part of the Agricultural Hall.

The Colonel was strictly enjoined not to monopolise his daughter, which, as he was growing fonder and prouder of her every moment, he thought hard. He had rejoiced greatly to hear that Campion's engagement was broken off, less on account of its undesirability, than of the opportunity it left for making his daughter's acquaintance, before a lover could step in between them—and now a fresh lover was at hand already, and the Colonel felt an injured man.

However, his sister was so ardent in her advocacy of Babcock, and discoursed so earnestly on the necessity of

protecting Sybil from falling again into Campion's clutches, that the Colonel yielded at last. 'If you say he's a good fellow,' he conceded——'well, I shall see him at this tournament affair, and then we can talk about it.'

But, to Mrs. Staniland's chagrin, the fourth chair remained unoccupied, though the Colonel, who sat in it, delighted with his daughter's pleasure in things military and with her looks and her talk, and all that was hers, felt he could manage to bear it if Babcock stayed away altogether.

It was very hot where they were, and he thought at last she was looking pale, and suggested that she should come somewhere for afternoon tea, to which Sybil—who was finding the artillery contest beginning to pall, and had a secret dread that they might take it into their heads to fire the gun—assented willingly enough, and the father and daughter departed, leaving Mrs. Staniland, who remained in case Babcock should arrive.

Presently, Mrs. Staniland saw her brother coming along the chairs beaming,—'Become of Sybil?' he said, in answer to her inquiries, 'oh, it's all right, she's in good hands. Whom should we meet downstairs but this young Babcock, and, I remembered your orders, Hilary, and it struck me, by Gad, they'd get on better without a third party. Wasn't that right, eh? And I like the fellow, I must say; he deserves her for his pluck.' And with this the Colonel told the incident of the gangway. 'If she had fallen, nothing could have saved either of 'em; it was touch and go, by Gad! Think of losing my little Sybil just when—and in that way!'

'Horace, it's wonderful, a special providence, really,

and you've done *quite* the right thing! Lionel will have something to tell us when he comes back.'

So in high good humour, Mrs. Staniland watched the light cavalry, as they made their horses lie down and afford cover behind which they discharged their carbines; and her content lasted until she saw a well-gloved hand held out and Babcock, elaborately attired, was standing over against her chair.

'Well—is it all right?' she asked, anxiously.

'Oh yes, thanks. Couldn't get here before, don't you know.' He had delayed from policy, thinking it well that Sybil should begin by missing him, and unwise to appear too eager.

'And where is the dear child?' continued Mrs. Staniland. 'Oh, Lionel, when I think of what might have been but for your bravery. And is it all settled? Where did you leave her—does she want me?'

'——Meaning?' inquired Babcock laconically.

'Why—why, *Sybil!* haven't you come from her?'

'Eh?' said Babcock. 'Sybil! Haven't seen a sign of her!'

'Horace, what does this mean? do try and collect yourself—*this* is Mr. Lionel Babcock.'

The Colonel's jaw dropped as he bowed mechanically. 'Then, then—who was the *other* fellow?' he murmured blankly.

'Ah!' commented Mrs. Staniland, in a bitter undertone, 'if you have come all the way from India for *this*——'

And probably the Agricultural Hall did not contain a lady of her years and position in a worse temper.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN WHICH THE LUCK TURNS MORE THAN ONCE.

PERHAPS, considering that Campion's conduct still required explanation, Sybil may be charged with some want of firmness in waiving the past as she did. But, setting aside the fact that it is not easy for a generous girl to be very severe upon a man who—whatever his offences may have been—has just saved her from imminent danger at the risk of his own life, Sybil was really too overjoyed to see Campion just then to give a thought to her dignity.

It was a relief, after all she had heard, to find him so little changed; she could not look at him and believe that he had allowed any troubles, real or imaginary, to degrade him; she could not doubt that he loved her still as devotedly as ever.

And then she had recently learnt from Perceval himself, to whom she had happened to sit next at dinner the evening before, that, whoever it had been who had frightened her from the studio that Sunday evening, it was certainly not Ronald, who, as the Academician had distinctly said, had been his companion on the houseboat from Friday till Monday. Perceval had not recognised her as the original of the Grosvenor portrait, which was not perhaps

astonishing, so that by a few judicious and apparently careless questions, she was able to obtain some facts about Campion's recent fortunes that bore out much of the Chela's story.

As for Campion, he felt it must be all a mocking dream from which he would wake in his own studio or the club smoking-room, but in the meantime the vision was carried out with the most perfect realism, even to the advertising placards in the refreshment room, and the doubtful tablecloths; and he and Sybil were at one of the little tables, with only a bowl of very cloudy sugar between them, and she was resting her chin in her palm and looking at him as she used to do—it was altogether a pleasanter dream than any he had been accustomed to of late.

'I want to tell you,' she began, with a certain effort, 'how sorry I am I wrote you that horrid letter.'

'It was all Nebelsen's blundering,' said Campion. 'But you don't think now that I ever dreamed of asking you—you of all persons in the world—to take back that idol?'

'Not now. I didn't then, till—till I was obliged to believe you were trying to frighten me into coming to you. And I did come—oh, Ronald, I must tell you—I came to the studio to take it back.' And she described her visit; when she came to the strange laugh Campion grew pale.

'I know you were not there,' she added hastily. 'You were with Mr. Perceval at Wargrave, he told me. But who *was* it?'

'If I were to tell you what I believe, you would think me mad,' he said. 'But, thank Heaven, you didn't go in!'

'Ronald, you don't mean that you believe my idol had anything to do with it! It was a *laugh* I heard—a laugh like yours would be if you had grown wild and bad.'

'I know,' he said gravely. 'For all I can say, it may have had some object in making you think you heard me. Confound its impudence! it's capable of anything.'

'But, *dear* Ronald, do think what you are saying: an idol!'

'I know, Sybil, I know it must sound mad—but I firmly believe there *is* something evil in that accursed image. And I can't help suspecting it must have some special spite against you. I confess I'm deeply thankful you were not induced to go in.'

'It was not as clever as Red Riding Hood's wolf,' said Sybil; 'it drove me away. But I can't bear for you to have these horrible fancies about it. I wish—oh, *how* I wish I had never bought it for you! I can't imagine how I came to buy it,' she cried remorsefully. 'It seemed just the right thing then. And now promise me—promise you won't keep it a day longer!'

'Don't be uneasy, dearest, it is all right at last, though you would scarcely believe how hard I found it to shake it off.' And here Campion gave her an account of his various abortive attempts to part with it.

'It almost seems,' said Sybil, 'as if the thing had taken some dreadful liking to you.'

'If it has,' said Campion, with a vindictive satisfaction, 'I rather fancy I've damped its growing attachment

this time. It must be exceptionally fond of me if it retains any affection at the bottom of a canal, inside a leather bag—for that's where it is just now, Sybil. And only see how the luck turned directly. I come straight here, and meet you. Better still, your father, who I expected would be prejudiced against me, is as jolly and friendly as possible!'

Sybil's eyes had a mischievous sparkle in them. 'Yes, but I've been thinking,' she said demurely, 'that perhaps poor dear papa didn't quite gather who you were.'

'But he recognised me!'

'Yes, as Lionel Babcock. He was to have met us here.'

A cloud passed over Campion's face. 'Babcock!' he exclaimed. 'Sybil, tell me, am I in time still?'

'Do you suppose I should let you be here if you were not? But ah, Ronald, I don't like to think what I might have been driven to do in the end, if I had had to give up all faith in you I nearly lost it several times, and I am sure Aunt Hilary hopes to get her own way even now.'

'But you won't let her! You do believe in me now, Sybil?'

'I can't help it,' she said simply, 'though I don't understand it all yet.'

'Nor I, for that matter; but so long as you trust me through everything, nothing can part us again, can it?'

'Nothing shall. And if papa once came to know you—— Shall you be at the Academy soirée to-night? we are going.'

'Perceval gave me a ticket. I hadn't intended to use

it, because, you see, when they haven't hung you, it isn't a particularly pleasant way to spend the evening; but I will go now.'

'And,' continued Sybil, 'if by any chance I can't bring you together to-night, I shall insist on taking papa to see you to-morrow, and Aunt Hilary may say just whatever she chooses. We are going to be happy again after all, Ronald; you will see how well everything will go now.'

Ronald wished the waiter would look another way, so that he might gain possession of Sybil's hand, which lay so temptingly near him, but the waiter, who possibly carried a blighted heart under his dress shirt, kept a sardonic eye upon them, and his chin-tuft had a contemptuous twist.

'If it never goes worse than this!' Campion was saying, and at that moment Mrs. Staniland swept into the refreshment room with the manner of a Queen Eleanor, followed by the Colonel looking as if he would very much rather not have come, while Campion felt that, after all, the waiter's eye had its advantages.

Campion rose and stood upon his defence; Mrs. Staniland drew one of the light chairs up to the table and sat down, while the waiter drew near expectantly. She was evidently in an extremely bad temper, which was not improved by the necessity of ordering a cup of coffee before she could get rid of the waiter and open fire.

'Well, Mr. Campion,' she began, 'do you think this is creditable behaviour on your part?'

'I have done nothing discreditable to my knowledge, Mrs. Staniland,' he replied stiffly, 'our meeting here was

quite an accident, and Colonel Elsworth himself asked me to take charge of your niece.'

'Took you for someone else,' growled the Colonel.

'Sybil, *you* knew there must be some mistake, and you made no effort to enlighten your father; he has only been home two days, and you deceive him already!'

'Papa,' pleaded Sybil, 'I hadn't seen Ronald for so long, and then he saved my life!'

'Jove, Hilary, you know,' said the Colonel, in an undertone to his sister, 'she's right there.'

Mrs. Staniland was not to be mollified; it was too bad this detrimental should have turned up just when her plans seemed about to succeed. 'He may have saved her life,' she said; 'I was not there; but even if he did, he had no right to presume upon it. We won't detain you here any longer, Mr. Campion.'

Mrs. Staniland scarcely returned his farewell, and the Colonel did so with a constraint that cost him a secret effort; the young fellow might be as ineligible as possible, but he thought his sister was rather hard on him; however, he had made a mess of it, and concluded to hold his tongue till he saw his way more clearly.

But Campion cared little. Sybil believed in him, Sybil loved him still; sooner or later things would come right, he could wait now.

As he came out into the passage again and passed the gangway, the hall was enlivened with a military spectacle so brilliant and so unwarlike, that the strictest Quaker might be enchanted by it—the musical ride of the Household Cavalry.

But he was in no mood to be allured by it just then; the vast hall seemed too small to contain his happiness; he had to seek the open air and the crowded streets.

He walked fast and hard (for a great joy, like a great grief, demands action of some sort), and got back to St. John's Wood by a long round some time before it was necessary to begin to dress for the soirée.

After a fashion, he had already dined somewhere, though he probably could not have said what his dinner consisted of, and so there was nothing to do now but sit in his studio and build castles in the air.

Most people would not have thought his prospects particularly hopeful: his reputation as a painter had certainly fallen off; he had bills to meet, and no notion where to turn for money; but he had shaken off the hideous image that was sapping all his confidence and courage, and immediately his whole horizon had brightened. What did he care for the past now? it had not divided him from his darling; she was true to him, and he would win her yet.

So he dreamed as the dusk drew on, and the clock in the studio struck eight, and then nine. In half-an-hour or so he would begin to dress. It was unusually dark for the time, he thought, so dark that he could not see the clock, and could scarcely believe it was no more than nine. Just then a church clock began to strike—it took a long time surely to strike nine; he counted the strokes . . . *twelve*. He lit a candle to reassure himself, and then saw something which struck consternation and despair into his soul. Above the clock rose the too familiar

countenance, bland and beaming as ever, of the thing he had fondly believed to be smothered in the black mud of the canal!

How had it burst the confines of its bag and returned thus out of the depths to confound him? It was not muddy, it was not damp, it bore no traces of its temporary seclusion—and then he missed Perceval's cast, the lovely little head of Cybele of which he had been enjoined to be so careful.

What if, from the confusion his head had been in, or under the strange illusion which this diabolical image seemed to shed around it at will, he had substituted the cast for the idol? That would account for its lamblike submission, for its presence here still.

And now it was too late to go to the soirée and meet his darling that evening; the idol must have corrupted his clock, and caused it to lull him into a false security. His ill-luck had returned with this hideous effigy! He felt recaptured by the old superstitious dread.

What was he to do? Must he submit to this ill-omened presence in the house, and when Sybil was to bring her father there next day? How could he tell what its malice might not suggest, and its occult resources enable it to carry out?

Whatever it was, limited as it might be in power and intelligence, it had shown already a marvellous readiness in adapting itself to circumstances, as if able in its new surroundings to observe and turn its observations to account with hyper-oriental subtlety.

It might have some deep and consistent design through

all this, but if it really meant anything but sheer malevolence, it surely might find some clear means of conveying its wishes. As it was, he dared not let Sybil endanger her life by venturing within range of it. He must find some method of reducing it at least to temporary harmlessness, only what was left which had not been tried and proved a failure already?

We must leave Campion endeavouring to grapple with his revived difficulty, and return to Babcock. The Colonel's mistake at the Military Tournament had upset Mrs. Staniland's plan, and, without telling Babcock more than was desirable, she gave him to understand that he would have to postpone speaking to Sybil till later. He was not particularly uneasy, even though he guessed to whose care she had been entrusted; Campion must long ago have given up all pretensions or he would not have acted as he had done; most probably the interview was equally involuntary and irksome on both sides.

The Colonel came back to his seat alone, explaining that his sister had gone home with his daughter, who was feeling the shock she had received—Babcock and he watched the rest of the entertainment in company and silence, but the invitation to dine with them that evening, upon which Babcock had reckoned, was not given. 'Didn't hit it off with him, somehow,' he reflected afterwards; 'never mind, I've got the women on my side.'

He had fortified himself with a good dinner, and driven home to dress, when he found Nebelsen at the door of his flat.

'Were you coming to look me up?' he said,

'I wanted to consult you as a worldling,' said Nebelsen.

'Come in, I can spare you ten minutes, and then I must dress. I'm due at the Academy soirée in an hour. Now,' said Babcock, as he lighted candles, 'what can I do for you?'

'How is the custom in this country for a suitor who wishes a yong maiden for his betrothed—does he first to the barent speak?'

'All depends, Nebelsen. You've more chance with the parent if you speak to him first, but you've less chance with the girl as a general rule. You don't mean to say you're asking for your own information? Is this why you've got yourself up with entirely new scenery and effects—are you in love?'

'She is so fair,' said Nebelsen, 'with eyes like the stars, and a soul snow-pure.'

'Yes, but my dear chap, you can't marry on stars and snow, don't you know. Has she got any other property?'

'I do not know. I haf not ask.'

'Well, have you?'

'Enough with what I shall gain at giving Philosophy lessons to live upon with care.'

'Doesn't sound hopeful—take my advice, and stick to a single life.'

'You say that because you are bachelor, and a despiser of all domestigated joys.'

'Shows how much you know about it, Nebelsen. Do you see this ticket?' and he took one from his chimney-glass. 'This card is my passport to felicity; when the porter takes it, he will take my bachelor existence too.

You don't follow? Well, I'm going to meet the sweetest girl in the world at this same soirée, and I've made up my mind to ask her to have me this very evening.'

'And you haf no doubts what she will say?'

Babcock smiled. 'Well, I don't want to boast, but I fancy I've as good a chance as any other fellow. I used to be afraid of that confounded Campion, but he has done for himself now.'

'Campion! It is not possible that you are speaking of Miss Elsvort?'

'Ah, I forgot you knew something of them; but there's no harm in mentioning names; you see, it's time I married, and she's a dear little girl, I don't see how I could do better, do you?'

'No!' said the Chela, in a low voice, 'not you, and not the greatest in the land, could do better.'

He was greatly discouraged by finding a rival where he had hoped for a confidant. What chance had he against this worldling with his wealth and his easy self-confidence?

'Glad you think so,' said Babcock. 'Well, of course, this is all in the strictest confidence at present. I only told you to get you out of that notion of yours that I was a confirmed bachelor. And now there's just five minutes left for your own love-affairs. I thought, by the way, you were vowed to celibacy all your life?'

'It was not a vow, only it is found that even the purest affection is rather a hindrance to occult progress, but that matters not now since I haf renounced occultism, my Mahatma, further initiation—all, all!'

'You don't mean to tell me you've only just found them out?'

'I believe in them just as before, only my Mahatma is become indolerable; you remember at Sussex Place, the letter which came. Ach! you gannot fancy what was within!'

'Unless it recommended you by any chance not to be a condemned fool?' said Babcock.

'You know—but how then?'

'How? Simply because I wrote it.' And Babcock burst into a shout of laughter—'scribbled it off while you were out on the balcony! Greek character; because you knew my hand, and I didn't know your Mahatma's. Then I gave it a twist up in the air behind everybody's back—and there's one occult communication accounted for! So you took it all in, and actually went home and solemnly renounced your Mahatma, and the Bounding Brothers of Thibet, and all their works on the strength of it! Why, I made sure that you would see through my little joke, though I was pretty certain you wouldn't say so at the time; it's too funny!'

'Yes, it is too fon-ny!' said Nebelsen, savagely. 'They will think me a worthless apostate, which will very amusing be, and I haf renounced all the hopes which made this earth-life bearable. I shall be quoted in their annual rebort as a failure; all because of your fon. Ah, you are a so charming humorist, Mr. Babcock, that you will appreciate a leedle biece of psychical fon in return for yours. You are to meet this yong laty at the Academy to-night?'

'Well,' said Babcock, 'have you any objection?'

'Yes, you do not see her to-night! Another, a rival perhaps whom you do not fear, will speak in your place, and it will not be your cause he will plead——. You will not be there!'

'I should like to see anyone try to stop me.'

'You are going to see me. You may not know that in agomblishments of an electro-biological kind I am, as you would call, a high-distinguished dab. Often, only by always looking at him haf I a man from eating his dinner brevented. You think not, eh?'

'On the contrary,' said Babcock; 'I've no doubt you could spoil any man's dinner if you gave your mind to it. But I've had mine.'

'Still you shall haf an illustration of what I can do with my will-powers.'

'Look here, Nebelsen, of course I know it's all bosh; but I won't have any tricks played on me.'

'If it is bosh it cannot affect you. See now, I direct my will against yours. I wish you to give me your admission ticket.'

'Nonsense!' said Babcock, in a thick, sleepy tone. 'Are you mad? Give you that! . . . Well, don't make a fuss; I don't mind letting you have it to look at; not to keep, mind. I'm acting of my own free will; of my own free . . . There, *take* the ticket!'

'And now,' said Nebelsen, as he took the card and stood looking steadfastly at the uneasy Babcock, 'go and sit down in that chair.'

'See you—— first!' spluttered Babcock. 'Well, why shouldn't I sit down?' he added, as he obeyed, 'it happens to be a favourite chair of mine. . . . I was going

there before you spoke. Confound you, Nebelsen, what are you doing to me? Take those eyes of yours off; take them off, I say!'

'You will not stir till it is twelf o'clock.'

'It's a devilish comfortable chair, I can tell you, but if you think——Nebelsen, give me that ticket back; I see what you're after. . . . That rascal Campion's at the bottom of this! Give me that ticket, will you? Oh, very well, I've changed my mind; I shan't go out to-night . . . it's too much trouble. Don't imagine you've anything to do with it. I choose to sit here, that's all!'

And he sat motionless, his prominent eyes fixed in a cataleptic stare; however Nebelsen's power may have been assisted by the fact that his subject had been recently dining, the weaker will of the two just then was certainly Babcock's.

'A thousand thanks for your so kind gift of a ticket,' said the Chela benignantly. 'I tell Mees Elsvort you are sleepy, and not able to come yourself. Goot night!'

Babcock probably heard and understood, but he made no answer, and Nebelsen shut the door with a guttural laugh at the success of his experiment.

That evening the rows of guests who line each side of the Vestibule at Academy soirées and lend such suggestions of landing at Folkestone to the ceremony of reception, were much entertained by the demeanour of a spectacled foreigner, with a short and spiky yellow beard, whose appearance, as he bowed to the President, provoked discreet but hearty merriment behind the shrubs.

Nebelsen, however, was unaware that his dress suit had not learnt as yet to accommodate itself to his figure,

nor would the fact have interested him had he known it. He was absorbed by one idea just then—to find the fair English maiden and speak as his heart bade him.

It is never very easy to find the right person in a crush, nor are the Academy rooms adapted to the pursuit. Nebelsen made his way painfully from room to room, with a tormenting conviction that his object was always a room ahead of him, and then, just when he had given up in despair, he saw her behind a marble group in the Sculpture Gallery.

Sybil, too, had been scanning faces with slowly waning hopes. Why did not Ronald come? Surely nothing would have kept him away that night, if all were well.

So her face lighted up at the sight of that queer-looking friend of his, and he welcomed the greeting as a favourable sign. 'You have something to say to me, haven't you?' she said, taking advantage of the fact that her aunt was too far away to hear. 'I think I *should* like an ice or something, if you can take me out of this crush. . . . Mr. Perceval, will you tell my aunt that I shall be back almost directly?' And before Mrs. Staniland who, on her side, was impatiently expecting the twice-defaulting Babcock, could notice what was happening, Nebelsen, with no very clear idea where he was going, was mounting a staircase by Sybil's side.

Sybil seemed to him more enchanting than ever that evening, and he was beginning to expand with triumph at the idea of having outwitted Babcock, when her first words somewhat dashed his confidence.

'You do come from him, don't you?' she said, 'Ah! I knew it! No—no ice, thank you' (they were passing a

buffet at the head of the stairs). 'See, this library looks quiet. Now tell me—*why* isn't he here?'

It was cool and dim in the library, with its sombre colouring of morocco and mahogany seen by shaded lamps. They had the place to themselves, and Nebelsen could not have found a better opportunity, though his thoughts were too sadly fluttered by this ill-timed reference to Babcock to avail himself of it just then.

'He was a leedle schleepy after his dinner,' he said; 'he ask me to make his abology.'

'Herr Nebelsen!' cried Sybil, 'I can't believe that—you are deceiving me!' something—some misfortune has happened to him—please tell me all!'

'No, no, he is quite well—there has noding happen, and ach! Mees Elsvort, beleaf me, he is not vorthy for you so moch to care!'

'*You* are against him too? I thought you were his friend!'

'Not any longer—he has done it himself. And I am afrait I shall make you angry, and yet—if you only could tell me it is not lôf you felt for Mr. Babcock?'

Had anyone else asked such a question she would have been angrier, but Nebelsen had a child's naïf unconsciousness of offending. 'You've no right to any answer when you put such questions as that,' she said, 'still, just this once I will satisfy your curiosity. Mr. Babcock is nothing to me—do you understand—nothing!'

'Ah! how you make me glad!' he exclaimed, with a deep sigh of relief, which Sybil imagined was on Campion's account.

'Then Ro——Mr. Campion has not told you?' she said. 'I thought you came from him. You know we were once engaged, and then it was broken off; and I shall always be very, very grateful to you because you first made me suspect that there might be an excuse for him I could never have dreamed of. And now I am sure of it, and—and we met only this afternoon, and everything is as it used to be.'

The poor man's castle came rattling down about his ears. Perhaps it was the dust it made that choked and blinded him for a few moments.

He was indeed unfortunate. No sooner had Campion, as he imagined, hopelessly disqualified himself, than a new rival presented himself in the shape of Babcock, and just when he had ceased to be formidable, Campion reappeared triumphant.

'No,' he said, 'I did not know—I did not know that.'

'Yes! And Herr Nebelsen,' she added anxiously, 'he was to have been here to-night, but it is so late, and I can't help feeling uneasy, even when he has got rid of the idol at last.'

'How got rid?' inquired Nebelsen; and Sybil told him what she had been told herself.

'I tell you, nefer will he get rid of it in such way; it will come back efery time more and more angry,' he said, when he had heard her story. 'He will not understandt what it wants, and I myself, I can only guess. But I suspect that in the Mahatma's ledder was a misdake which makes a great difference.'

'But you can find out, surely?' urged Sybil.

'Not unless I gonsult Shang Gasba, and you forget we gorresbond no more, I have gast him off. Yes, I am sorry,' said Nebelsen, with a gloomy satisfaction he could not altogether disguise, 'but I am afrait Mr. Campion is having more drouble with that idol, and that is why he is not here to-night.'

'Oh, but it can't be that; it's all so impossible!' cried Sybil, 'and yet *he* believed it . . . it may be all true—that wicked thing may have come back! Oh, Herr Nebelsen, do help us!'

'Too late,' he said, 'without my Mahatma I cannot know if I am right about the misdake, and the remedy, and with him I quarrel.'

'But you can make friends with him again; he may be more amiable when you come to know him better. And if Ronald is in danger! See, Herr Nebelsen, I gave him that thing, and if any more mischief were to come from it, it would kill me, it would, really!'

'You ask me to do all this!' he cried, almost savagely; 'to groffle back to my Mahatma's feet like a beaten buppy! If I never had seen you so would I still gontented be. For your sake I renounce my Mahatma and my Chelaship both, begause I would be free to lôf—yes, I tell you it was lôf, and for you! And now you want me to eat my vorts, to put my bride in my bocket and gonfess myself a gommon fool—all for Mr. Campion!'

Sybil was beyond all measure surprised and shocked; it had never occurred to her that there was any room in Nebelsen's head for thoughts of love. 'I am so sorry, so very sorry,' she said, looking at him with mournful eyes

in which wonder was still lingering. 'If I had known, I would never have pained you like this. And now you have told me, I can't of course ask for your help. After all, we may be frightening ourselves about nothing, don't you think so? But it is the uncertainty that's so dreadful, and the not having any idea what to do!'

Her sorrow and resignation seemed to produce a revulsion in Nebelsen. 'Do not veep, please,' he entreated; 'or I also shall veep—and I veep so schtrong. I haf been a fool, ever to beleaf you might lôf me—ever to think I could be like other beople happy. And since I cease to be a chela, I grow selfish, and my sixth brinciple is slowly berishing. There is taincher in that idol, and something tells me now he has not done with Mr. Campion. If it is not too late, I will dry to get regonciled with my Mahatma. To-morrow early I go to Mr. Chowkydaree Loll (he is the brother, you know, who was the medium for our gommunications), I will promise anything—I will groffle and roll and abologise blentifully. And then perhaps they will tell me the best thing to do, and if I was right in my suspicion that there was a leedle misdake in the last message.'

It may be thought that the Chela was rather a broken reed to rely upon in any emergency, but Sybil was glad to secure his assistance notwithstanding. If the idol was really disposed of, there would be no occasion for Nebelsen's services, but if it had reappeared and meant mischief, the person who predicted the danger was, after all, best able to cope with it.

For a great foreshadowing of evil had come over her

and Ronald's failure to keep his word seemed more and more significant; she was restless, feverish with the dread of what might even now be taking place, and Nebelsen was the only person who understood her terrors in the least.

'And will you go to Mr. Campion at once, and warn him of all you suspect? If you wait till to-morrow you may not be in time. Dear Herr Nebelsen, tell me you will go to-night!'

'It is late now,' he said, 'past twelf—but if it is your wish, I go.'

She made him take her back to the Sculpture Gallery at once, and leave her to listen to her aunt's speculations regarding Babcock's non-appearance, while her own thoughts were engaged in trying to account for another's absence, which surely nothing but an unforeseen calamity could have caused.

Nor would she have been in any way relieved could she have known the result of Nebelsen's visit; for he found the little house and studio in Romanoff Road dark and silent, and he came away at last, not having dared to ring or knock, with a disquieting conviction that his repentance and his help had come too late.

'I will go to Mr. Loll at once—he is never an early bedgoer,' he decided, 'he will tell me if I am right, and, who knows—there may be time yet! But ach!' he reflected, 'more and more I dread that, through the knavishness of that Babcock, and my own folly and falling away, it is out of my power to help now, when I would willingly do so! There was too much stillness in that house.'

CHAPTER XIV.

ANTÆUS THE SECOND.

All confused I could not know
Whether I suffered, or I did:
For all seemed guilt, remorse, or woe,
My own or others, still the same
Life-stifling fear, soul-stifling shame.—*Coleridge.*

For some time after recognising the unpalatable fact that the idol possessed a 'homing instinct' far surpassing that of the most domestic cat, Campion sat and stared at it with blank and intense disgust. It would take no hints and offer no suggestions; it was only too easy to offend it, and apparently impossible to get rid of it. Willingly would Campion have exchanged it for Frankenstein's much-quoted monster, for from that creature you knew the worst to expect; and it had the tact to absent itself for considerable periods. But none could say what this petrified enigma wanted, or how far it would go in asserting its dignity. For the present, it sat there and simpered, as though in apology for its pertinacity; but poor Campion had learned to hate its flaccid smile with a deadly hatred, all the deadlier because it was so largely tempered by fear.

What was he to do with it? He must do something, and quickly, too; the hour was late, and he would not give it hospitality for another night.

It was useless to attempt to lose it again—he *would* return; Campion 'knew him well,' as the song says. And then the perplexing direction of Nebelsen's dubious Mahatma recurred to him. What if that person, assuming him to exist, cultivated the obscurity of the Delphic Oracle? What if 'the hand from which it came' was a Mahatmaism for the earth which had held it so long in its grasp? What if the idol, like an impecunious classic shade, only craved decent burial?

Campion was not the man to resist so rational a desire. The plan commended itself to him for many reasons. Even if he was mistaken, the idol could work but little bale at the bottom of a good deep hole; it would be out of his sight, out of the house, where it could not harm his Sybil.

It is painful to have to record such superstition on the part of a sturdy and healthy-minded young Englishman, but let those who are disposed to deride Campion's uneasiness ask themselves candidly whether his experiences did not justify some degree of apprehension.

At all events, he wrapped the image in the piece of drapery which had already been spoilt in its service, and providing himself with a palette-knife as the best implement at his disposal, he went out into the weedy little plot of ground in front of his house, and began his task.

It was a close, airless night, with a murky sky through

which the very moon looked hot and flushed. Campion found it warmer and more difficult work than he had imagined to dig with such a substitute as he had for a trowel. However, he scratched up the mould in little showers as well as he could, and while thus engaged, he heard the heavy-booted tramp of a night constable ringing down the flags of that quiet road.

Campion did not disturb himself. There is no police regulation forbidding a man to bury any of his household gods in his garden; it may be eccentric, but it is not unlawful. So he hummed, like Juvenal's penniless traveller.

The steps came nearer. Now and then the constable stopped to try a gate, or flash his bull's-eye through a keyhole, or listen at areas; but at last, just as Campion had constructed a really handsome hole for the idol's reception, the steps paused at his own gate, and a patch of light from the lantern danced over the garden and up the house-front.

'What are you doing of in there, eh?' said a voice across the railings.

'Well,' said Campion, 'I don't suppose you would ever guess.'

'I guess you can't be up to any good at this time o' night, if that's what you mean.'

'Why,' cried Campion, with sudden recognition, 'I ought to know that voice. Isn't your name Yarker?'

'Quite correct, sir, Mrs. Staniland's man that was. And I reckonise you now, Mr. Campion, sir. But without wishing to make trouble, I don't reckonise what business you can have inside of another party's front garden.'

'But it's my own garden—this is my house! Have you forgotten that in your new duties?'

'I can't say,' said Yarker loftily, 'that I ever give the subjick much attention, beyond knowing you were a artist. You see, when I was at Sussex Place, I always used to bear a sort of a prejudice like against you, not for what you was, for I'm one of them that draws no distinctions in that way. If a man feels he can't get a living in any other way except as a artist, let him *be* a artist, I say. *I* don't blame him for it.'

'Those are broad views, Yarker,' observed Campion.

'Some may call 'em so, but they're mine. Well, as I was saying, I didn't take to you all the same, you was too free and easy to please *me*. I didn't like your conversation when you lunched with us; I didn't hold with your perlitical views—you don't mind me a-telling you this now?'

'I'm only sorry you didn't drop me a hint at the time.'

'It wasn't for want of inclination; but as you mayn't be aware, perhaps, there's a social etiquette in these things. No butler that respects himself would take it upon him to interfere, let the family violate his feelings ever so in their talk. And that was one of the things that made service go against me so. You don't only put your body into a livery, you put your pussonal opinions and your sentiments. I've heard ignorance talked at table to that extent, I could 'ardly 'and the dishes for indignation—but it wasn't my place to say more than "'ock or sherry!"'

'And you get more freedom of opinion in the Police?'

'Well, I don't know,' said Yarker thoughtfully, 'I don't get what I call yuman serciety.'

'Why, you've all the—what-is-it?—V Division, haven't you?'

'Ah! but the Police, take 'em as a body, ain't what I call an intellectual lot. You don't get much exchange of ideers on or off duty amongst them. I assure you, that for general information there was a little club of gentlemen's men that I used to belong to, which I've not met their equals in the Force up to now.'

'And you find yourself pining for intellectual society?' asked Campion.

'Well, sir, I do. Not that I regret the change for some things. As a policeman I'm more looked up to by the outside public. I've more weight, and I find I've gained influence in my former suckle when I go amongst it. But it's lonely—there's no denying it; it's got to be a pleasure to me to talk with almost anybody. You can see that by my staying here talking to you.'

'Yes, but if your country calls you,' said Campion, continuing his excavations, 'you mustn't let me selfishly monopolise you, you know.'

'There's no hurry for a minute or two,' said Yarker. 'It would make you laugh if I was to tell you what I took in my head when I first saw you in here. I couldn't get it off my mind as you was trying to get rid of something.'

'Perhaps I am,' said Campion.

'Ah, but I mean something unlawful, such for instance as a unlicensed burial now; there was a case down Kensal Green way last week. That was a baby.'

'Sorry to disappoint you,' said Campion, laughing, 'but as a matter of fact——'

He had elaborated his hole and was preparing to deposit the idol at the bottom of it, when a horrible thing happened: the thing *moved*—moved under the wrappings in his hand.

He dropped it as if it had bitten him. 'As a matter of fact,' he continued, without knowing what he was saying, 'I'm only doing what I have a perfect right to do in my own interests; every householder can—abate a nuisance I think you call it——But I am keeping you.'

'No, you are not keeping *me*, thank you, sir,' said Yarker cheerfully. 'As I said, a little conversation is a treat to me. Did you say you was a baiting something, sir, for a nuisance—a trap, I take it?'

'Yes,' said Campion, stealthily putting out his hand to assure himself by touch that his imagination had deceived him, and that nothing stirred inside the drapery.

'I suppose now,' he continued, not knowing how he was to get rid of the official, and seeking desperately for a safer topic—'I suppose you have a good many opportunities of studying ah—astronomy on your beat?'

'Well,' said Yarker, 'I knoo all I care to know about that already—there's Charles's Wain now—I can point *him* out with anybody.'

'Oh,' said Campion, acutely feeling his own inanity, 'and—and the Great Bear—do you know that?'

'I seem to have heard of the Great Bear; and ain't there a constellation called the Plough, too—and Uriah's Belt?'

'Why, you're quite an astronomer!' cried Campion.

'Oh, I've read in my time, mind you, and it's wonderful how much more a man finds he knows than he thinks

he did when he numbers off like. But there, I get a-talking, and all the time I never asked you what it was you was trapping!'

'Drains!' said Campion, wildly, 'my garden's overrun with them!'

'You needn't answer me back like that,' said Yarker; 'if I'm willing to talk free and familiar, it isn't for you to take advantage of it. I asked a civil question, and if you're going to talk flippant, it's time I left you to yourself and went on with my rounds.'

And to Campion's intense delight, he moved slowly away, obviously insulted.

However, he came back to observe, 'A policeman has his feelings, you know, and to be put off as if you was being too inquisitive when you ask a friendly question—why, well—*there*!'

Campion was about to say nothing, but it seemed expedient to soothe his ruffled feelings. 'Hang it, man! it was only a joke,' he said, 'Nothing to get hurt about. There, you must find it thirsty work these warm evenings.'

'Thank you, sir, I'm sure,' said Yarker, 'I'll take it in the spirit it was intended—though of course they're not open now—and well, there's no occasion for hurry yet awhile; you go on with what you were doing of, and don't mind me.'

But, somehow, Campion was afraid to touch the idol while that ugly impression of its having wriggled was still fresh. The only way to get rid of Yarker was clearly to wound his feelings—he must try again.

'I suppose, after all, you are sent out to perform certain

duties,' he said; 'don't you think you'd better attend to them?'

'Well,' said Yarker, stiffening instantly, 'now you put it in that pointed way, perhaps I had. One of my duties, as it appears, is to inquire into anything of a suspicious appearance. Now suppose I was to think it my duty to inquire into that hole—where would you be, eh?'

'You wouldn't be much the wiser,' said Campion; 'but there, Yarker, I didn't mean to offend you—only, well—I came out here to be *alone*!'

Yarker had uttered his threat without any direct intention of carrying it into execution, and Campion's last words convinced him that there was no real foundation for suspicion.

'I've no wish to intrude on you! he said, 'I'll wish you good evening.'

'Good evening,' said Campion, and his heart leaped. It leaped as far as his mouth the next moment, however, for suddenly, just as the constable was moving off for the last time, there arose a wild, muffled wail, as startling as the night-scream of a peacock.

'Hello!' said Yarker, stopping, 'where did that come from?'

As if to set the point beyond dispute, the horrible thing inside the wrappings began to howl and roar with renewed vigour, and Yarker stepped back to the railings and turned his lantern full upon the bundle. 'What's those stains?' he said.

'Paint,' said Ronald, for the stuff still retained the colour that had been wiped from the idol's face.

'Ha!' said Yarker, and he undid the gate and stalked round to where Campion sat helpless on the worn turf, wondering if he was going mad.

'Now I'm not going to have any more nonsense about this,' he said, with a complete change of manner—the butler was merged in the constable yearning for distinction—an honourable endorsement on the charge sheet and promotion—'that's *blood*, that is, and you know it. Open that bundle, Mr. Campion.'

With a grim anticipation of Yarker's astonishment when he saw the idol, Campion unfolded the drapery and, as he did so, rose to his feet with a hoarse cry.

The rays of Yarker's lantern fell directly upon the bundle, revealing a sight at which Campion felt his brain swim. The idol was *alive*—or rather, in its place was a changeling which, in some grotesque fashion resembled it. As Campion stared, fascinated, into its smooth yellowish face, the eyelids slowly went up and two cold, glassy eyes returned his gaze with a steady malevolence, and then the whole face worked, and the thing broke out anew into a resounding bellow.

'So that's what you were after, eh?' said Yarker, 'oh depravity, depravity!'

'You can't be more surprised than I am,' said poor Campion; 'I don't know what makes it go on like this.'

'Enough to make it, I should think, when in another five minutes it would have been all over with it. Mr. Campion, I couldn't have believed it of you—what harm did that pore innocent ever do to *you*?'

Campion kept an obstinate silence; *he* was the inno-

cent one of the two, but of what use would it be to tell a policeman so? He began to realise that, at last, the idol was roused—that he was on the brink of a terrible scrape.

'It's a mistake, I tell you—a mistake,' he faltered.

'You're right,' said Yarker, 'you see what comes of leading a nasty idle life. There'd have been murder done if I hadn't happened, by a lucky Providence, to be passing—if you haven't been jobbing at it with that knife already, as it is. This is a bad business, but I must do my duty. I arrest you on a charge of attempted child-murder, and anything you may say now is liable to be took down and used against you. Now, sir, come along with me quiet.'

'Yarker, my good fellow!' he protested, 'you're all wrong—do you hear? It's not what you think—you can't mean to get me locked up!'

'Now, am I to sound my whistle and bring my mate from Marlborough Road, or will you come pleasantly like a gentleman, arm in arm along of me?'

'Let me go in and leave a message with my man,' urged Campion.

'Not if I know it—you can send messages to-morrow—once more, do you want me to whistle?'

Campion had to submit. Escape was madness, where he was known and would be tracked at once; besides, escape would be an admission of his guilt.

'Yarker,' he said impressively, 'I give you my word you will not be defeating the ends of justice in any way; you will not harm a living soul, if you let yourself be persuaded by me now to take a sovereign—I mean a five-

pound--or rather, a ten-pound note—and—and go away and think no more of this little incident.'

'You were not quite so proficient with your tips at Sussex Place,' said Yarker. 'No, sir, there's things as can't be squared not at no price. Excuse me, while I make a note of what you said: "incident," was the term you employed, I think? Thank you, sir. Now I'm ready, and we'll be jogging along.'

'I'll come quietly,' said Campion, with a groan. 'Spare me as much as you can.'

'We'll stroll along as if we'd just met and were chatting casual—I don't want to act otherwise than as a gentleman if you're sensible; so give up that instrument, and I'd better take this unfortunate infant myself—there! Now then, sir.'

Yarker strode along by his prisoner's side with one hand within his arm; for some time he kept a solemn silence, while Campion glanced with a dull interest at the pragmatic face under the helmet, and the letter and number gleaming on the collar.

But the constable was not the man to walk long without attempting conversation; he was burning with curiosity, and that passion for cross-examination which distinguishes members of even longer standing in the Force.

'Heigho, Mr. Campion!' he began, 'I little thought when I used to enounce you at Sussex Place, that one day I should have to show you into a police-station.'

Campion made no reply: 'Come, sir, be pleasant,' said Yarker, 'I'm trying to make this walk as agreeable

as I can—meet me arfway, sir. If you'd *like* to give some account of how you came to contemplate such a predicament, why, I'm here to listen, and it will pass the time if it does no more.'

'The less I say, the better,' was all Campion said in reply to this exhortation.

'I wouldn't say that, sir. Of course I'm not holding out no promises, nor yet threats; but still, if you could bring yourself to tell me, quiet like, why you took such a rash hact into your head, you might find it a relief. I should be inclined to surmise now, that you'd been led into it gradual—?'

'Surmise as much as you please—only keep it to yourself.'

'Now, now,' remonstrated Yarker, 'why bring any temper into it? *I* ain't angry with you. I'll change the conversation if you prefer it. . . . See how the moon's gone in since we've been chatting; seems to me there's a storm brewing somewhere—the air's that stifling. I'm rather partial to a moon on my beat. It's company like—not, of course,' he added considerately, 'that I'm not in the best of company at the present moment. Now some folks tell you they see an old man in the moon, and a dog, and what not—all I can make out is a female's face, all twisted like as if she'd a bitter taste in her mouth—is that how you see it? It ain't no use a damming of the poor moon. . . . Now don't get 'ard,' he resumed. 'About this 'ere babby now. This feels to me like a fine-grown child I've got here—it's uncommon heavy. Wonderful how sensible children are! it's as good as gold

now it knows it's safe. Don't you feel just a bit sorry for it, now it's over, sir, eh? It isn't everyone as likes babies—but, lor! there's ways of keeping separate from 'em without burying them in holes in a garden, now ain't there, sir? Why, you could ha' sent it to the workhouse or the Foundling, now, and here you've gone and got yourself into a serious mess like this; there ain't no sense in it, sir, as you must see yourself by this time.'

'Confound you, *will* you hold your tongue?' Campion burst out, exasperated.

'Do you think I'm talking for my own pleasure? I only do it to keep your spirits up—it ain't every constable that would make himself so affable, I can tell you, and if it wasn't for your being an old acquaintance. . . There's a dance going on somewhere near here, you can tell that by the 'ansoms! Are you a dancing gentleman, sir? Oh, yes, I remember you used to come to our dances occasionally. Well, well, there's no harm in *dancing*—if you'd never done worse than that!' And here Yarker drew a moralising sigh. 'About how old might this here child be? It's as quiet as any Christian. Not, I dessay, as you'd ever think to have it christened? . . . Now what *is* the good of all that bad language?'

That walk seemed to Campion like a ghastly dream-pilgrimage, with Yarker's conversation—which was largely prompted by mingled malice and curiosity—as a running accompaniment. Now and then the constable stopped to try a gate or a window-fastening, and once he reported himself to a 'fixed-point' sergeant, but nothing interrupted his small-talk long.

All at once, a man in evening dress passed them close and then stopped and turned back.

'Campion!' he cried, 'the very man I was coming to look up!'

It was Babcock, who had recovered from his recent lethargy, and, too late for the *soirée*, had started to find Campion, who he expected would reach St. John's Wood about the same time, and whom he believed to be the instigator of the liberties Nebelsen had taken with him.

He was the last man Campion expected or desired to see just then. He thrust his hat down over his eyes and took refuge in obstinate silence. 'Here,' said Babcock, 'just turn back with me; I've something to say to you.'

'Very sorry, sir, but he's got an appointment with me at present,' said Yarker.

Babcock laughed. 'Why, you haven't found *dynamite* on him, have you?'

'No, no—not so bad as that, Mr. Babcock, sir,' said Yarker, who knew him well.

'Do you mean to tell me you're really taking him to the station!' cried Babcock, in astonished delight. 'What have you been about, Campion? Why don't he answer, Yarker, eh?'

'Well,' said Yarker, 'you can see for yourself that he ain't in no condition to answer questions.'

'By Jove!' cried Babcock, as Campion accepted this excuse resignedly. Anything was better than having to reveal his awful position to his rival and enemy. 'So he's been kicking up a row, eh? dear-dear-dear! Well,

Yarker, I mustn't interrupt you—two are company—don't be rough with him, poor devil!'

And he went off hastily, lest he might be called upon to furnish bail, which he had no desire whatever to do under the circumstances.

'Pleasant-spoken little chap, Mr. Babcock, ain't he?' said Yarker, when they were alone, 'and liberal with his arf-crowns. I'm downright fond of Mr. Babcock, I am—aren't you, sir? Well, there's no occasion to bust out like that anyhow—you *are* behaving unsociable to-night, I must say!'

And he said no more now, for they were in a narrow, quiet street with a square building at one end, over the door of which burned a lamp with a blue pane; one or two night-prowlers joined them here and accompanied them to the threshold, but Yarker shut the door sharply in their faces, and Campion found himself in a brightly lit room with dingy buff-coloured walls and a dado of mottled green; there were a table and benches at one end, and at the other a little inner office like a hotel bar.

Yarker deposited the bundle on the table. 'You sit down here, sir,' he said to Campion, 'we'll attend to you presently; the inspector's engaged with that gentleman just now.'

Against the wall was a small railed-in space, breast-high, with a wicket at the side, and penned up in this, was a rumpled and dirty little man, who smiled affectionately at the inspector, for whom he seemed to have conceived a violent fancy, though he evidently considered it

a 'good point of cunning,' as Bacon says, to give a different address every minute.

This took time, and Campion had ample leisure to think calmly over his situation. How would it end? The idol had waited long before striking—but it had taken a deadly revenge at last. It had overwhelmed him in a scandal from which, whether he was exonerated or not, his name would never recover. But how *could* he be exonerated? What plausible explanation could he give and how account for the infant, the palette-knife, the pit he had dug? And a thought which nearly drove him mad—what would Sybil think when she came to know?'

The little man, smiling more than ever, had suddenly and completely collapsed, like a concertina or a Chinese lantern, inside the rails, and they fished him delicately out by the coat-collar, and propped him up against a bench close to Campion, whom he informed, as a great secret, that he was 'ash nearly drunk ash twopensh.'

'Now, sir!' said Yarker importantly; and presently Campion found himself inside the railed dock, with the bar clicked upon him.

'A child, eh?' said the inspector, who regarded the affair as a mere matter of business. 'Dead or alive?'

'Alive, sir,' said Yarker, 'leastwise, it was when I first found it. Bellering horful, sir.'

'Why didn't you send round for the doctor at once? There, go at once, somebody, and don't lose any more time; leave the child where it is now, we can do no good till we know what the doctor says.'

More minutes of suspense, during which Campion

strained his eyes to catch some indication of life under the folds. He could see none—the bundle lay ominously stiff and silent, and a new horror chilled his blood. What if this diabolical thing had completed its revenge by *dying*? If he were charged with actual murder, convicted, *hanged*! He clutched the rail with moist palms as he thought of it—he would have joyed just then to hear it give even one of those hideous yells—anything to get rid of this uncertainty!

The divisional surgeon—a short, rough, bustling man—came in: 'Now, then, fetch that child over here by the lamp, will you, and let us have a look at it,' he said.

Yarker brought the bundle to him, and stood by as the surgeon slowly unrolled the folds. Campion's heart beat hard. '*What* did you say this was?'

'Infant, doctor,' said Yarker, whose gaze was directed to the ceiling.

'*You're* a pretty policeman!' said the surgeon, contemptuously; 'there's no infant here.'

The idol had relented then—ah! the relief of it!

Yarker rubbed his eyes: 'Well, I could ha' sworn I heard it howl,' he said; 'but, if it ain't that, doctor, what *is* it?'

'You've been wool-gathering, you know, 247. I shall have to report you for this,' said the inspector.

'Mr. Campion, sir, you can bear me out, sir!' said Yarker; 'you heard it, and saw it, sir, too.'

'I told you at the time you were mistaken,' said Campion; 'you wouldn't listen.'

'And quite right, too, as it happens,' said the surgeon; 'do you see what this is, inspector?'

The inspector touched it gingerly. 'It looks to me,' he said, 'like some form of dynamite.'

'Exactly—I've never seen it in this particular form, but I've no doubt in my own mind that it is dynamite.'

Dynamite! Well, thought Ronald, it was serious enough—but at least it was more respectable than the other charge.

'Why the devil couldn't you say so at once, 247, eh?' said the inspector; 'you've made me make a false entry—what's come to you, to take a parcel of dynamite for an infant?—you'll hear of this again, let me tell you!'

The unfortunate Yarker, with his dreams of promotion shattered, stood dumb and trembling as the inspector altered the charge with some temper. 'Now, sir,' he said to Campion, 'do you wish to say anything at this stage?'

'No,' said Campion, 'except that I know nothing whatever of any dynamite.'

'Very well, you will be detained for the night on suspicion, and to-morrow, when we've made inquiries, you will be taken before the sitting magistrate at the Marylebone Police Court—put him in number 3.'

And so Campion found himself locked in a cell; he sat there for long with faculties benumbed, wondering what would come next, and staring at the gaslight in the corridor as it flickered through the corrugated glass.

He knew perfectly well that he had lost Sybil now—her father and aunt would never consent to her marriage with a man whose name had figured in the police reports.

And when, only that afternoon, he had regained his darling, when she was actually to have brought her father to see him next day—oh, it was hard, hard!

He tried to think whether he could have acted differently; why did this Indian fiend behave in this unconscionable way? he had tried to get rid of it—what more could he do? what else did it want?

And his excited fancy began to speculate upon the compromising avatar which the idol might next choose to assume; it could not be long in finding out that it had made an error in the second transformation; or had it some even fell purpose in this? Did it intend to explode and involve itself and him in common ruin—was *that* its revenge? And Sybil would hear *where* he had perished—and never know why!

And so the night dragged on, and now and then there were military tramplings and rough brief reports, and orders indistinctly heard; at times came the roars of the wild beasts at the neighbouring Zoo, and the drunken prisoner, who occupied an adjoining cell, where he seemed to sleep but badly, beguiled his wakefulness by repeatedly recommending a female by the name of Jennie to 'wait till the clouds rolled by.'

And when this had apparently lasted for hours, Campion fell asleep on the bench, and his troubles and perplexities slipped away for one long, vague second.

CHAPTER XV.

THE DAY AFTER.

CAMPION opened his heavy eyes to find the blue light of morning streaming in through the glass pane of his cell-door; cocks were crowing lustily from neighbouring back gardens, vendors were crying mackerel in the streets outside, milk-cans were clattering, and boys whistling—the suburb was awaking with its usual short-lived cheerfulness.

All these familiar sounds jarred hideously upon Campion just then; they heralded his humiliation. In another two hours or so he would be standing in a police-court dock, charged with—well, whatever new crime the taste and fancy of this Proteus of an idol might see fit to fasten upon him! His name would be in all the evening papers, the magistrate would probably remand him, and refuse bail. Oh, the bitter shame of it all!

His heart was consumed with helpless rage at the utter impracticability of his situation. Thought recoiled from it baffled, and he fell at last into a state of what he believed was stoical calm, which was actually a stunned torpor.

At last a constable—not Yarker—unlocked his door.

'Inspector wishes to see you, sir, in the office,' he said civilly enough, and Campion followed him to the room in which he had been charged the night before.

The inspector looked up with a distinctly worried expression. 'Look here, sir,' he began, 'we're not used to this kind of thing here. I've taken two distinct charges against you for the same thing, and I should like to hear any answer you may have now before we go any further with the case.'

'I reserve my defence,' said Campion, 'all I can say is, whatever the charge is, I'm innocent of it.'

'Come, sir, if you'll tell me what the thing was that No. 247 found on you, I may meet you farther than you fancy.'

Was it a trap? It might be—but Campion decided upon perfect candour as his only chance.

'You won't believe me,' said Campion, 'but it was neither more nor less than an Indian image—in fact, an idol.'

'Right, sir,' said the inspector, 'and if you'll cast your eye into that bucket, you'll see it.' And in the bucket of water was the idol, head downwards, but not appearing to resent the indignity.

Campion breathed freely; whether it had relented, or had merely arrived at the end of its resources, it evidently did not intend to carry things further at present.

'Well,' said the inspector, 'I don't know how I came to detain you—I really don't. I made certain last night, and so did the surgeon, that it was one of those dynamite preparations; it's been locked up safe in my inner room

all night in that bucket, and it certainly don't look anyway like an explosive now. Can't you explain it anyway?'

'I think,' said Campion, 'you're the person to explain things.'

The inspector coughed. 'I am sure,' he said, 'you're not the gentleman to make any fuss about this little mistake. You see, we're bound to look after ourselves, naturally, and if you were not willing to meet us half-way, why we could make it unpleasant for you, as it is. It does no man any good, in the long run, having the police against him. If you follow me, sir——'

Campion saw that his immediate discharge was only a matter of arrangement, the inspector being mainly anxious to avoid the consequences of any public complaint or proceeding; and shortly after, to his own intense surprise, he left the station a free man.

How delicious the June morning was! The shadows stretched blue and cool across the roads, the lilacs dangled fragrantly over the garden palings, bright-faced girls cleaned steps or shook mats at the doors, and he noted all these things with a new pleasure.

It promised to be a very hot day; already the heat made a pearly haze in the middle distances, and heavy lurid clouds, touched with pink and gold, rose like a mountain range at the end of each long vista; Campion walked slowly, with his detested burden under his arm, half-expecting it to develope some fresh peculiarity.

He was annoyed, as he went in by the studio door, to find Bales there dusting. 'You're up early, sir, this morning!' said the man, with his eye on the idol, which it was useless to conceal.

'Why, yes, *I am* rather early, Bales,' said Campion, in a tone he hoped was jaunty.

'If you *must* go out without telling no one and stop out all night, which I made sure something had happened,' said the unmollified Bales, 'there don't seem no sense in taking that there idol along with you. My poor wife thought it had been stole, she did, but as I told her, there ain't no one likely to steal it, I says. But you've been making quite a companion of it these last few days. I'd sooner set up a monkey, if it was me, I would.'

At any other time Campion might have recommended him to mind his own business, but he was too demoralised just then to do anything but make a lame attempt to account for himself. 'Why, you see,' he said, 'I didn't know I should be out so long. I met an old acquaintance, and he—he takes an interest in these things, and I was detained so long over it that he insisted on putting me up for the night.'

To which explanation, which was both superfluous and disingenuous, his henchman merely vouchsafed a snort, indicative of more than doubt.

'There's that furrin party as used to have all them curls waiting to see you,' he added; 'he said he couldn't stop long. I told him I thought you was a-bed.'

And Campion, on going to his room, found Nebelsen just about to leave.

Campion felt a certain embarrassment at the recollection of their last interview, but the Chela was evidently willing to resume the old footing, and the painter was in no mood just then to decline any overtures.

'Ha!' said Nebelsen, as he observed the idol, which his friend was still carrying under one arm. 'So you haf him still?'

'Yes,' said Campion wearily, 'he doesn't seem tired of me yet. I've given him the slip several times—but he always turns up smiling. Last night I tried putting him in a hole.'

'And he would not remain—no?' said the Chela sympathetically.

'He not only would not remain, but he managed to put *me* in the hole instead,' said Campion, 'with the pleasing result that we both spent the night in a police-station.'

'Ach?' cried the Chela, 'wunderbar! But I knew always that alone you could nefer esgape—you may dry and dry, but always will it the same be. And now when I haf learnt still more—but you will not listen, you think I am stoffing!'

'Nebelsen,' said Campion, rather shamefacedly, 'if you'll forget how I behaved last time, and help me like a good fellow, I shall be grateful. I've found out by bitter experience that I'm no match for this devilish thing alone!'

'Begause you are all on the wrong track. I tell you, last night I meet your lofely Mees Elsvort, and—and I haf som talk with her. I want to gif her some bleasure, and I find there is now but one way. And so if you will only gonsent to place yourself entirely in my hand, I will see if there is not yet a way to bacify that idol.'

'Well,' said poor Campion helplessly, 'do just what

you think best. I leave it all to you. Only tell me what you are going to do.'

'It is something which I nefer before haf done, but which I am quite sure, by a leedle effort and faith, I shall be now able to perform,' said Nebelsen. 'But listen, and I tell you from the beginning. When you com to see me that oder day, I had shust on a sodden had the suspicion that my Mahatma had not after all given you bad advice. The message, you know, was through the Babu Chowkydaree Loll, by occult means brecipitated, and it struck me all soddenly that either by a want of gon-centration of the Mahatma, or begause the Babu was not just then attending, an *h* was quite possibly along the astral current by mistake for an *l* brojected. So late last night I went to Mr. Loll and ask him if it might not be so, and he quite agrees. More; he has tolt me a legend which, for me, accounts for nearly all that has occurred. Now do you understandt?'

'Why,' said Campion, 'I'm afraid I'm still rather fogged, Nebelsen.'

'I cannot stay now to clear your fog—in a leedle vile I com back and egsblain exactly what I am going to do and why. Now there is no time; I must go and fetch my steel wand, and do som oder businesses, and then I begin to vork for you.'

'But in the meantime,' objected Campion, 'how do I know that this beastly thing mayn't begin *again*!'

'It is too soon yet, after so moch force-manifestations. Leave him down in your paint-room till I can com at him. Oh, he will be all quiet! I answer for him.'

Of what Nebelsen intended to do Campion, of course, had not the vaguest conception, though he gathered that it would be performed with a wand; he could only pray that it might have as little of the ludicrous in its operation as was compatible with the nature of the case, and just as hopeful persons spend money on advertised remedies, because it seems clear from the advertisements that other people believe they have been benefited, so was he infected by Nebelsen's unquestioning faith in his latest nostrum.

Campion had not, of course, forgotten Sybil's promise to bring her father that day, though it had seemed extremely uncertain for a time whether he would be at home to receive them. Fortunately the worst was over now, and yet he began to doubt whether this interview, if it came, would be much of a success, and when, later in the morning, Colonel Elsworth was shown down to the painting-room—alone, Campion felt a pang of dread. Why had not Sybil come? Was she angry with him for not appearing last night? and if so, how should he excuse himself?

The Colonel looked, and indeed felt, by no means at his ease; he did not relish his mission, which he had been despatched upon, as the result of a long interview between his sister and daughter the night before, and he was an easygoing, peace-loving man, who hated giving pain.

'Now, Mr. Campion,' he began, embarrassment making him brusque, 'I've called to tell you plainly that anything like an engagement between my daughter and you can't be—it's quite out of the question—now don't you see that yourself?'

Campion answered that he should not dream of asking Sybil to bind herself in any way, still less to share his present difficulties, but he hoped that a time would come when he should be justified in asking her to renew their engagement.

'That's all very well,' said the Colonel; 'still you will do me the favour not to hope for anything so—so unsuitable, by Gad. From all I hear, sir, till yesterday—when I'm bound to say you behaved uncommonly well—you've not shown yourself very deserving of such a girl as my Sybil. You'll not deny that, I suppose?'

'I deny that I have ever consciously done anything to make me deserve her less. If you will tell me where you think I have acted unworthily, I think I shall be able to make you see you have done me an injustice.'

The Colonel, however, after all Mrs. Staniland's fulminations against her former *protégé*, only retained a general impression that he had taken an advantage of her by overcharging her for a worthless portrait of Sybil, which her father had not yet been to see. 'We won't go into that, sir,' he said loftily, 'there's no need. I daresay you could find excuses enough, if that were all. But my sister gives me to understand that Sybil was taken by surprise yesterday afternoon, and said more than she really felt, and—and in short, as a gentleman, you wouldn't wish to press any advantage you may have had under such circumstances.'

'Does she, your daughter, make that appeal?' said Campion, 'or do you?'

'I am here to make it for her, sir; these are things a young girl can best say through her father.'

'If she will write and tell me that it is as you say, or if you would let her speak to me, I would never trouble her again. And, even as it is, I only ask leave to hope. I can't give that up, unless she orders me to.'

'Do you suppose I should tell you a lie?' demanded the Colonel hotly. 'If Sybil had come with me, she would, I haven't the smallest doubt, tell you exactly what I tell you now, and that is——'

'Mrs. Staniland and Miss Helsworth,' said Bales, opening the upper door, and Sybil, with a look of constrained fear in her eyes, came down the steps, and stood between the two men.

'Let her speak for herself,' said Campion, with a chill at his heart.

'Ha!' said the Colonel, 'Sybil, this is irregular, you know, irregular. You had no business to come here!'

'It's not my fault, Horace,' said Mrs. Staniland, who had just made her appearance; 'she found out that you had gone here, and nothing I could say would prevent her from coming too—so of course I had to accompany her!'

'Well, now she is here,' said the innocent Colonel, 'let her tell Mr. Campion downright that she finds she mistook her feelings yesterday. Don't be frightened, my love; he has promised to take your word.'

'Are you *mad*, Horace!' said Mrs. Staniland in an angry whisper; 'it's for *you* to put a stop to this, and at once. The idea of leaving it to her!'

Sybil was looking from her father to Campion, with a puzzled contraction of her eyebrows. 'I don't understand.'

she said. 'Ronald, why do you look at me like that? *What* am I to tell him, Papa?'

'You told me she felt like that!' the Colonel was saying aside to his sister.

'*Would* feel like that, in time,' she rejoined. 'You are to tell him nothing,' she said to Sybil, 'leave him to your father and me.'

But Sybil had gone to her lover's side. 'Nothing has happened to you then?' she said softly, 'tell me, why didn't you come last night? I—I made so sure you would!'

He felt he could not tell her the whole truth. 'I was —unavoidably detained,' he said, cursing himself for the stiffness in both phrase and tone.

'I didn't think you would let anything detain you,' she said, rather sadly. And just at that moment her eyes fell on the idol, which was on a chair by a window, with the palette-knife, which had so nearly provided it with a grave, and which the inspector had returned to Campion with other confiscated property.

'Oh!' she cried, with an awe-struck reflection, '*it* has come back. Was it that which detained you, Ronald?'

'Yes,' he said, 'it is the old story, only worse—much worse.'

'Sybil,' broke in Mrs. Staniland, 'your father wishes you to go home with me at once. How the most ordinary proper pride can allow you to speak to Mr. Campion at all, after the manner in which he has thought fit to insult you, and the ingratitude (not that you would think anything of that) with which he has rewarded me, is one of those things I can't attempt to understand!'

'Papa,' pleaded Sybil, 'don't send me away—not just yet! You don't know how you and Aunt Hilary both misunderstand Ronald. He has done nothing—at least whatever he did do he never meant—it is all the idol!'

'All the idol?' repeated the Colonel blankly. 'Do you know what you're talking about, my dear child?'

'Yes, yes,' she repeated wildly, 'look at it—that ugly thing on the chair. And it was *I* who gave it to him, that's the worst of it! Oh, I know I explain very badly, but then I don't in the least understand it myself.'

'Then I shouldn't try to explain it,' said Mrs. Staniland, tartly. 'I have very good reason to know that idol—unhappily, and the less Mr. Campion says about it the better. Anyone else would have got rid of it long ago!'

'I don't know how anyone else would have managed,' said Campion; 'no one could have tried harder to get rid of it than I have; but the confounded thing won't go.'

'Won't go?' said the Colonel, 'that's a curious way of speaking.'

'I have tried to sell it,' said Campion drearily, 'but no one will buy, or say "thank you" for it. I even pawned it, and a kind friend redeemed it. I lose it, and it gets itself brought home somehow. I drop it into a canal, but it doesn't stay there. I tried to bury it, and it —well, it *wasn't* buried!'

'Doesn't seem to me a bad sort of idol,' said the Colonel critically, passing by these statements as wilful exaggerations; 'usual kind of Buddhist image, seen scores of 'em in Burmah. Why should you be so anxious to get rid of it? what's wrong with it?'

'I don't know,' said Campion, 'I can only say that ever since it came into this house nothing has been as it used to be. It *began* by killing Mrs. Staniland's dog for merely barking at it, as she will tell you herself.' (Mrs. Staniland here intimated that she could give a very different version of that accident.) 'In an evil hour I painted it into a portrait I was doing of your daughter, and in some abominable way, when I saw it again, the idol had absorbed all her features and given her its own. I can't believe my Academy pictures would have been what they were if I had not been in a sort of way bewitched. I splashed its face with paint once, as a test—and I was perfectly colour-blind till I wiped it clean again. There must be *something* the matter with it!'

'With yourself you should say,' said Mrs. Staniland, 'if you really believe all you're telling us. It lies between two things: either you are under a delusion, or—well, I leave the inference to you.'

'Then I'm under a delusion, too,' said Sybil, 'for *I* believe it! And, ah! here is Mr. Nebelsen, he believes it too—he will tell you so.'

The Colonel was understood to say something about 'confounded nonsense' as Nebelsen entered by the studio door, and joined them with a look of mystic enthusiasm and determination on his face.

'That in that leedle idol there are maleficent properties resident?' he said in answer to Sybil, 'certainly I beleaf him. More also, I com hier now expressly to egsblain to Mr. Campion how and why, aggording to my latest solu-

tions-theory, this is scientifically bossible, and brobable even!'

'Papa, you will listen, too?' cried Sybil. 'Mr. Nebelsen —my father,' she added, as the Colonel gave a grudging acknowledgment of the introduction.

'If Herr Nebelsen is going to try to persuade us that Idolaters are right, and we are wrong,' put in Mrs. Staniland, 'I must really ask to be excused.'

'We had better hear anything Mr. Nebelsen may have to tell us,' said the Colonel resignedly. And the Chela was by no means loth to detail his latest discovery to the larger audience.

As for Campion, it was no doubt ungrateful on his part, but he wished Nebelsen had come at any other time. He had an instinctive dread that the excellent theosophist would throw new and more ridiculous lights upon the question, and that his last scientific solution would be as practical as its predecessors.

However, it was useless to think of interfering. The Chela, evidently in a state of high and solemn enjoyment, was already beginning to discourse.

'First of all what I haf to tell you,' he began, 'is that your idol is most likely not a Buddhist emblem at all. He is, or so my goot friend the Brother Chowkydaree Loll thinks, a Jaina idol, and the Jains, as you know, are still a flourishing sect in India. You do not see what difference that makes? Well, I am going to tell you. Their images are all to commemorate some one who when alive was shust a very holy man—a "tirthankar" he is titled. Now there is a tradition that, within the last hundert year,

someone for a time got into the Saints' Galendar without any business, and afterwards turns out to be not a true tirthankar at all, but only an impostor. And what the Brother Loll beleafs, and I also, is that, not unlikely, that idol there on the chair is the very same which once was erected to him.

'I know what you all are thinking—if he was an impostor, how can his idol in any way fearworthy becom? Wrong; begause the more impostor, the more will his idol work—not of course that his idol can do anything at all—that is too absurt for anyone to beleaf! But an impostor, and bartigularly if he has dead on a sodden gone, is more likely to manifest—I will show you why.

'All these sainted men in their earth-lives have been *yogis* and ascetics, instructed in the oggult nature-secrets, and engaged in evolving out their higher fagulties, and becoming spiritualised. Therefore, if the yogi of whom this is the idol was truly all he was supposed, when his body is dead, he is all sixth and seventh principles—he has done altogether with the earth and all further ingarnations upon it; he is away zomwhere, everywhere, egstasizing so happy in the gonscious non-existence of Nirvâna. What has he to do with any idol? Noding—noding whatefer!

'But now, if he is not holy, or not so spiritualised as he pretended, but a great large humbug only—what then? All his life he has a part acted, of one who has gonquered the garnal passions and desires, and in his inside he knows well it is quite oderwise. Why should he such a mask wear? From pride and from ambition, from the love to asdonisb, and to be by the gommon beoples revered and

homaged. And, the same while, he has really such occult skill as every fakir or yogi, who all are adepts in their low way, would possess.

'Very well; this impostor sham dies, his body is berished away from him, and yet he has not Nirvâna deserved; he has even brobably his spiritual *ego* so starved that it no longer exists, and his doom is that for ever the whole individuality is in the fifth principle centred!'

Here Nebelsen paused either for effect or breath; and the Colonel, hopelessly at sea, but thinking he ought to say something, said 'Quite so,' with a rudimentary yawn.

'Yes,' continued Nebelsen, 'he is now no more than a shadowy entity, an invisible ghost essence, gombounded of the passions and desires which had too much vitality to berish with the body, and are yet too moch of the earth to rise far away from it.

'And this Thing is gonscious to some extent; it has all the faculties and powers, though they too will slowly decay, which are of the pure intellect, and all the dominant thoughts and ideas of his life remain as a power and force, until they of their own violence exhaust themselves.

'You do not see yet? I am goming to it. What will be the dominant ideas of an impostor who all his life has aimed to be respected and feared? Why, of gourse the surviving remnants of his individuality will all be gon-cerned in maintaining his reputation, and his reputation is in his idol bersonified. With his occult skill, which he still has, it is easy enough to arrange leedle miragles for him, and exact homage, and bunish unbelievers—I have no doubt his idol was for a time quite generally respected.

'Then—whether he was perhaps found out, or his worship put down—it must have com somehow to the end, for, years after, this idol, if it is the same, was out of the earth dug. And all these years that his idol is buried, what is the tirthankar spirit about? Noding—he is paralysed, lying torpid and dormant, storing up force like the electric eel, until his idol is again disgovered, and he has something once more to think about.

'Next over hier to Englandt he coms, but at first he does not understandt—everything is different, and he feels only that no one any more pays notice to his idol, which makes him very annoyed, and so, whenever he can, he bunishes and he bunishes—and noding ever comes of it!

'That is how, even after he comes hier, he behafes, but by this time this bersonality, so greedy for homage-worship, is more and more growing able to remember, and to observe and galgulate, though quite what he meant by his first tricks no one can tell you. Perhaps he himself could not explain; perhaps it was only cross temper. But to me it seems that he wanted to sebarate poor Mr. Campion from Mees Elsvort, from all his friends, and have him altogether to himself. So, from time to time, his will-power, of which he is all made-up, is goncentrated upon this so unfortunate Mr. Campion, and that is perhaps why he so often rather guriously bainted—for you see, when the stream of this volition is directed upon him, then will he not what is in his own mind uppermost baint, but only such subjects what are then occupying that dead tirthankar's psychical energies. And those subjects are, most

brobably, chiefly himself as he used formerly to be, and his idol representation as it now is.'

'I see,' said Campion, interested in spite of himself.

'And that is how you would explain my putting the idol in that portrait, and painting that fakir—why, it may even account for the barbaric colouring in those unlucky Academy pictures of mine!'

'Perhaps, either vanity, or malice, or jealousy, I cannot say. But all the time a stronger purpose than all is slowly shaping himself; by his brankish tricks he is striving, more and more, to make himself disliked.'

'With some success,' remarked Campion; 'I *don't* like him.'

'But why? ach! even I myself could not till quite lately guess. At last he has found out that, hier, in this land, his idol is not abreciated—he now desires to go away where it will be at home. So that my dear Mahatma was so right to say as he did, for I must now tell you I have no doubt, and so also Mr. Chowkydaree Loll, that what he *meant* to write was—"Return the idol to the *land*, not hand, from which he came."

'Then to aggomplish this result, the imitation tirthankar spirit puts all the bressure he can upon Mr. Campion, and Mr. Campion can only respond to his wish to go by trying himself to part with him—but no, that is not what he wants at all, and every time he is taken out, he comes back, always a leedle more angry.'

'And where *does* he want to go to?' said Campion, 'because I've no desire to detain him.'

'To India, of course—but over all India there are

Jains, and Mr. Loll does not even know to which part the legend belongs. But there at least you haf an explanation. I gif it you for what it is vurt.'

And Nebelsen, having finished his lecture, looked about him with much innocent satisfaction. His hearers received it, as might be expected, in various manners.

The Colonel, who did not happen to have had any previous acquaintance with Theosophical doctrines, seemed considerably taken aback, and gasped where he had begun by gaping. Mrs. Staniland was undisguisedly angry, holding that a mystic should mind his own business, instead of trumping up fantastic excuses for a young man whose treachery and ingratitude it was so highly undesirable to palliate just then. Sybil was mystified, and more uneasy than ever; and Campion, though secretly impressed by this new theory of his persecution, failed to see that it greatly improved matters.

'*Well*, Horace,' said Mrs. Staniland, breaking the silence, 'are you satisfied—aren't you going to say something?'

The Colonel pinched his chin. ''Pon my word,' he said, 'I don't exactly know *what* to say—it's a queer story—very queer.'

'But do you believe in an angry idol? you must be able to say that!'

'Why, of course,' said the Colonel, 'that's all nonsense! still, I must say, I think if I were Mr. Campion, I shouldn't like to have it about me. I *do* think that.'

'And pray why?'

'Well, this Indian magic's a curious thing. I've seen

something of it in my time; makes you doubt your own senses, by Gad! And then, when you come to look at it, it is rather too bad to put these native gods about our houses as ornaments. *We* shouldn't like it if a Parsee stuck up—well, say one of our eagle lecterns,' said the Colonel, casting about for an illustration, 'and made a hatstand of it. We should call it bad taste on his part now.'

'Oh, there's no question about Mr. Campion's *taste* in this matter. But I can see you half-believe already. Thank goodness, here comes a rational person—how did you find out we were here, Lionel?'

'They told me at Sussex Place,' he replied. 'I wanted to explain my absence last night. I must say, Campion,' he added, looking him meaningly in the face, 'I didn't expect to find you *here*!'

'Not in his own studio?' cried Sybil, resenting an indefinable something in his tone; 'he's not *you*, Lionel.'

The unhappy Campion was dumb. He suddenly remembered when and how he had met him the night before, and the misunderstanding that Yarker's well-meant evasion must have occasioned; worse still, he saw that Babcock remembered too, and meant mischief.

'And Nebelsen, too?' said Babcock, 'dear me; *two* unexpected pleasures!' On reflection he concluded not to make any allusion to the Chela's electro-biological performance. 'I suppose, Campion,' he went on, 'the magistrate thought a fine would meet your case, eh?'

'What magistrate?' cried Mrs. Staniland, scenting a special providence.

'Hasn't he told you?' said the amiable Babcock, who had realised from Sybil's expression that extreme measures were necessary. 'After all, though, I don't suppose you would be here like this if he had. But it's *his* story, I won't spoil it!'

'And I,' said Campion, 'see no occasion to tell it.'

'Pardon me,' said Mrs. Staniland acidly, 'there is *every* occasion.'

'It's unfair to press him,' said Babcock, 'for, really, now, judging from what I saw, I doubt if he can remember it himself. And everyone has his own ideas about how to spend an evening with combined profit and pleasure.'

'Ronald was with *me* yesterday afternoon,' said Sybil, proudly; 'I'm not afraid to hear what he did afterwards!'

'You have that quality, my child,' said Babcock, suavely, 'which the poet tells us is superior to a Norman extraction; take my advice, and ask no questions.'

'Ronald,' said Sybil, with a sweet imperiousness, 'tell *me*!'

The hopelessness of telling such a story, then and there, came upon him with a crushing force. By what evidence could he support it? Who would believe him against Babcock? He turned away with a stifled groan. 'Everything's against me!' he said, 'I can't tell even *you*, Sybil!'

And at this moment the door above opened, and Bales's stolid walnut face looked down upon them: 'Someone called and says he must see you at once, sir,' he announced, 'from the police-station.'

Was this infernal idol about to bring some new disaster upon him? when, too, he had thought to have done with policemen for a while! Campion's heart seemed to reverse its action; he stood helpless, speechless, in the track of this unknown advancing calamity.

'What police station?' Mrs. Staniland inquired, in an awful voice.

'I don't know, of course,' said Babcock, 'but I should imagine it was the establishment which had the honour of receiving him last night.'

'This is too disgraceful!' cried Mrs. Staniland indignantly.

But Sybil had come nearer to her lover's side. 'Papa Aunt Hilary!' she cried, 'he has done nothing disgraceful; it is that idol again! Ronald, was it not?'

'You know I would never deceive you, darling,' he said. 'It was.'

'Bah!' cried the Colonel, in violent revolt, 'there *are* limits, really, Mr. Campion! You can't make that ridiculous image the scapegoat for everything, you know!'

'Why not?' observed Babcock softly, 'the worship of idols, we all know, is not unfrequently attended by excess, especially of the kind in which he seemed to have been indulging when I had the pleasure of meeting him, under police escort, early this morning.'

'It's a lie!' said Campion, fiercely, 'I *was* arrested last night; I did spend it in a police station; but for nothing of that kind! If I told you how I came to be taken up, you wouldn't believe me!'

'*I* would, Ronald,' said Sybil, 'I know you have done no wrong!'

'God bless you, darling!' said the poor man brokenly; 'I was speaking to the others, and to them it's useless defending myself, I know.'

'Then I think,' said Mrs. Staniland, 'there's nothing to keep us here any longer.'

'One minute,' said Babcock, 'I have been informed I'm a liar. I should like to have that point cleared up. And I shouldn't wonder if the policeman (whom we are keeping waiting all this time) could throw some light on it if we sent for him. Shall we see?'

'Do you agree to that, Mr. Campion?' said the Colonel, with stiff politeness.

Campion knew only too well, after the inspector's hint, that the police were not likely, in their own interests, to admit that they had been mistaken; but he had ceased to keep any hold on the situation; things might end as they pleased, if only they would end quickly.

'I agree,' he said apathetically; 'Bales, you can show the man down here.'

CHAPTER XVI.

BRAVED!

As if Man, made for the contemplation of Heaven and all noble objects, should doe nothing but kneele before a little Idoll!—*Bacon.*

BALES, his wooden features betraying a lively curiosity, returned to usher in a policeman in uniform, and found the door more difficult to shut than usual.

'Why, the man's *Yarker*!' cried Mrs. Staniland, who seemed to consider this fact, for some reason, a fresh personal injury.

It was Yarker; he was standing on the top step, his air of potential insolence had vanished, and he was fondling his helmet with a constraint which somehow inspired Campion with a sudden hope that his visit might after all be unprofessional.

'Yes, madam,' he was saying, with a graceful butler's inclination, oddly out of keeping with his uniform; 'I hope I see you well, and you, Miss Sybil. I called to see Mr. Campion, I was not aware that he was receiving, and if agreeable, I can look in again.'

'Oh, you may just as well speak now!' said Campion.

'I don't know as I can,' said Yarker. 'It was only

that I wanted to apologise, being new to the Force, for my part in what happened last night.' He was hesitating between reluctance to make so public a confession, and the advantage of speaking before possible advocates.

'You see, sir, the inspector sent for me after you had gone and told me what had transpired, and he says, "Two hundred and forty seving you've exceeded your duty —but I don't want to get you suspended, you being an admirable orficer so far"—he says, "unless I can help it. So, if you can indooce the gentleman to promise to pass over your conduck," says he, "I shan't take no more notice." So as soon as I had done giving evidence in a case I was in charge of at Marybone (as vilent a case as I've experienced so far), I come on 'ere to arsk you if you would be so kind as to look it over, and not bring it before the press in any way, sir, which might be my ruing, and me not being hactuated by any personal enmity, which is a thing I should no more carry with my uniform, sir, than what I should a pot 'at. And there's always a difficulty in seeing distinct in the dark, sir.'

Campion breathed again; the constable was a good angel in disguise.

'I will say no more about it,' he said, affecting a judicial sternness, 'on one condition.'

'Namely, sir?' said Yarker.

'That you tell Mrs. Staniland and Colonel Elsworth here, exactly what took place last night; as if you were in the witness-box, mind. I promise you you shall have no cause to regret it.'

'As if I was in the box?' said Yarker, drawing a long

breath. 'Well, sir, if you desire it so, I'm sure.' And he began, with that air of a favourite scholar repeating a lesson, which marks all police evidence. 'On the night of yesterday, the —th of June, between the hours of twelve and one, hay hem, while on duty in this road, I passed the pris— I mean, Mr. Campion's 'ouse, and see him apparently occupied in digging in the front garding. He says to me "I'm trapping my drains," to which I says "Ho!" knowing that couldn't be. Then I noticed as he was burying somethin', and (which I'm sure I can't tell how I could be so mistook) come to the conclusion that he was interring a infant illegally and contrary to law. So I took him into my custody. On the way, (I'm aware this isn't strictly hevidence)—but on the way we met Mr. Babcock, and knowing Mr. Campion was not inclined for talking in his situation, and as Mr. Babcock was not the sort of gentleman to think the wuss of no one for being a bit merry and fresh like, I conveyed the impression to his mind that I wanted Mr. Campion for what—meanin' no offence to you, ladies—we call in the Force the "hordinary drunk." And, in course, I was sure Mr. Babcock was too much the gentleman to mention it again.'

'See how well Yarker knew you, Lionel!' cried Sybil, at which Babcock looked more than a little foolish.

'Well,' continued Yarker, 'when I took him into our orfice, the doctor and the inspector both say as what I'd found him with was not a infant nohow, and—on what grounds it's not for me to say—they pernounced it to be a dangerous explosive. So we locked the parcel up in the inspector's room in a pail o' water, and detained Mr.

Campion for enquiries. And in the morning, if you'll believe *me*, we found that what was in the pail was nothing more nor less nor one of these Heastern hidols, such as you might see in a tea-shop; and the inspector discharged Mr. Campion at once on his own responsibility—and that's all I know about it.'

When Yarker had been dismissed with a mind lighter and pockets heavier than when he came, there was another long silence. Babcock, who had really believed that his former friend had taken to bad courses and deserved to be exposed, was digesting his disappointment—as was Mrs. Staniland hers. The poor Colonel was completely staggered. A matter-of-fact British officer of more than middle age, even if his ideas on many things are still in a state of suspension, can hardly be expected to swallow so large a dose of the supernatural without a mental gulp or two.

Nebelsen availed himself of the pause. 'Can you not see how, more than ever, this proves that my subpicions are gorrect?' he cried, triumphantly. 'This departed tirthankar sees that his idol is about once again to be buried, and you remember that he can still, as an adept, hallucinations produce—why, then, should he not use his power to save the image?'

'Oh, of course, if you talk like that!' cried the Colonel, 'but why, if it began as a baby, didn't it keep it up?'

'Perhaps it was difficult, or not desired the hallucination any longer to sustain. But we gannot possibly determine anything except the plain facts.'

'Well, look here!' said the Colonel, 'look at the idol

now—is it doing anything? You're not going to tell me it's *still* hallucinating?'

'I do not think it. From so much force-expenditure as the personality must have made, there will be a recoil-period; and besides, he has accomplished his aim. Mr. Campion will not again try to bury it.'

'Well—no,' said Campion, 'he may make himself easy about that.'

'Now he will save himself up for his real object—to be to the spot on which he formerly flourished, with no more delay sent back.'

'And as we don't know it, and are not likely to guess it,' said Campion, 'I suppose I may, in the words of the weather prophet, 'expect fresh disturbances?'

'There is a way,' said Nebelsen, solemnly—'diffigult and dangerous—but a way still, and I am now about to try it.'

'And what do you propose to do?' asked the Colonel.

'I shall, by goncentrating my will-power, compel this invisible spirit of the false tirthankar himself to materialize. He will then be able to be asked questions and to answer; then I can gonvince him that, if he only will help, we are willing to assist him to return—it is the only way.'

There was something so unostentatiously self-assured in his manner, that even Babcock was impressed for the moment, and Mrs. Staniland was seized with unmitigated horror.

'Mr. Nebelsen,' she said, 'let me go before you begin. I can't stay here and see an evil spirit raised!'

'No one must stay except me only,' he said, as he

began to describe a large figure upon the bare boards with a piece of Campion's charcoal.

'May I ask,' said the Colonel, inspecting it curiously, 'what that is?'

'The sacred tetragram of all mystics,' explained the Chela, still drawing. 'See, at each angle I write one ledder of the mirific name—the four Buddhas who came and have passed away.'

'Ha! exactly,' said the Colonel; 'and what's it for?'

'To step inside, if the spirit when he appears should rampageous becom. I wish I could have had some leedle lamps of naptha burning with them, it is more safe—but there is no time for that. And now,' he added, as he rose to his full height, 'now I am prepared, and perhaps, if you would care to hier how I succeed, Mr. Campion will tell you where you can all wait till it is over.'

'There is my sitting-room,' said Campion, 'if you will come there. Nebelsen,' he added in a lower voice, 'are you quite sure anything will come of this? For Heaven's sake, don't let this end in some ghastly foolery!'

Nebelsen turned upon him with an air of solemn offence. 'It will end either that I com to a seddlement with him—or that I myself am into bieces torn,' he said.

Campion was infected by his earnestness. 'Then I can't let you face this thing alone,' he answered; 'I will stay too.'

'No, no,' protested the Chela, 'that will only make it more taincherous ior both Go with those beoples, and by

and by, when it is time, I com for you. One vort before you leaf me—you must gif me berfect liberty to act for you, oderwise can I noding do!'

'My dear fellow,' said Campion, 'if you really can get me out of this frightful business, make any terms you please—but I'm afraid you are going to find yourself disappointed.'

'I imblore you to say noding to me just now that is disgouraging—I want all my faith—and you dry to frighten her away!' said Nebelsen pathetically. 'Now go, and if I do not com soon to fetch you, it will be begause'—and here he wiped his eyes)—'begause I shall be all torn up!'

'You shall not run the risk!' cried Campion, 'it's not worth it. I'll put up with anything rather than let you do it—give it up, Nebelsen. I wish it!'

'You forget,' said the Chela, 'there is anoder whose happiness depends on me. And, between you and me, I do not beleaf he could get at me, inside my leedle tetragram—even if he is so bad enough to try. And now I am too far gone to stop—take them all away.'

He produced a small steel wand from his pocket, and pointed with it imperiously to the door.

'Where is this room of yours, Mr. Campion?' said the Colonel, 'because really, it's all so extraordinary, that I'm rather curious to see the end of it.'

So there was nothing for Campion to do but allow the Chela to have his way, and conduct the whole party to his room, for they all decided to remain; Mrs. Staniland, from a feeling that if she consulted her own wishes and went,

her brother would do something foolish; and Babcock to watch the case on his own behalf.

Campion felt his position more forlornly ridiculous than ever; hope as he might, he could not really believe that Nebelsen would make good his professions. If he had believed, he would not have deserted him so readily —he knew only too well he was clutching at a straw.

And Sybil, too, while she never doubted the Chela's sincerity, could not banish the uncomfortable recollection of his *fiasco* in her aunt's drawing-rooms, when he was quite as serenely self-confident.

So that as they all sat there, they formed anything but a cheerful party, and might excusably have been mistaken for patients preparing for a *tête-à-tête* with their dentist, while the physical atmosphere, charged as it was with the storm that had been gathering for some time, served to increase their depression.

The brilliant sky of the morning had changed to dull copper and livid green, against which houses took a chalky tone, and chimneys sent up smoke in straight threads of black, yellow, and white; the trees rustled uneasily in the hot dry air, and the sparrows' twitter had a note of alarm in it. The quiet neighbourhood was hushed to a deeper and expectant stillness, as if it shared their suspense.

'And how long are we expected to sit here like this?' demanded Mrs. Staniland, unable to bear the silence any longer.

'If we wait till Nebelsen evolves a ta-thankee—or whatever it is—out of the depths of his inner consciousness,' said Babcock, 'I should say, a considerable time.'

'I don't think you were absolutely pressed to stay, Babcock,' remarked Campion, whereupon his rival, who had every reason for remaining, held his peace.

'I wish,' said Mrs. Staniland, 'I wish I could feel I was doing right in remaining at all!'

'We're as well here as anywhere else,' said the practical Colonel, 'till this storm has burst.'

'Oh, dear!' moaned his sister, 'don't you hear something?—it's awful.'

It was growing darker and darker, and Nature still held her breath. From the studio below a sound as of strange tongues came fitfully through the two closed doors, and at last steps were heard outside, and the next moment Nebelsen had entered the room and closed the door behind him, with the deftness of a wild-beast tamer leaving the lion-cage.

They could not see his face for the gloom, but they heard him breathing hard and quick.

'Well?' cried everybody.

'It has been derrible hard labour,' he said, 'but I made him com. Oh, I can tell you he made me run inside my tetragram quick—he did not like at all to be materialized. Now he is a leedle bit galm. I haf tried him with Sanskrit, and Pâli, and Tamil, and he does not seem quite to gombrehend. But it is true that what he wants is to be taken to his own land, and I haf promised for you that he shall.'

'Where does he want to go to?' asked Campion, 'because, by Jove, he shall be packed off by the next P. and O.'

'He will not tell me till I bring you,' said Nebelsen, 'and—and you must not pack him away alone—you also yourself must go!'

'*I*?' cried Campion, 'nonsense!'

'Oh yes, you must go also, he must have someone who can be trusted to build him up again a leedle temple, and restore his worship as it formerly was.'

'My good sir,' expostulated Campion, 'do you really imagine I'm going out to India as high priest to that confounded image—why, hang it all, Nebelsen, I should never hold up my head again!'

'Too late now to gomblain,' said the Chela gloomily. 'I haf arrainched it so—you gave me *carte blanche!*'

The combined unreasonableness and absurdity of such an arrangement drove Campion furious. 'If *that's* what you call arranging, Nebelsen,' he said, 'I can only tell you it seems to me you've landed me in a worse mess than ever! But I repudiate it. As if I could possibly go out to India and build a shrine to set that humbugging thing going again; it's monstrous—absurd! And I shall just make that tirthankar understand that I'm not going to have any nonsense about this. His idol must go out alone like any other parcel. Everything shall be done handsomely. I'll pay it's carriage all the way—wherever it is—take a berth for it, if he makes a point of it. I'll insure the beastly thing heavily; but he'll have to look after it himself. *I* won't!'

'Oh, that is wild boy's talk,' said Nebelsen. 'Do you know what this bad spirit will do if you go back now and disaboint him?'

'I don't,' said Campion, 'and I don't care.'

'I'll tell you. He'll most likely strike you through your dearest one,' said Nebelsen in a quivering whisper; 'and she—*she*, and not you, is in danger by your obstinacy!'

Campion set his teeth. 'I see,' he said, 'you've left me no choice then, Nebelsen. There—I give in. . . I'll go!'

'It is not moch to do,' said the Chela encouragingly. 'Shust to go out to India with your idol and build him his leedle temple-shrine and com avay.'

'But, confound it, sir!' the Colonel almost shrieked, 'you ought to know that you can't go out there on such an errand as that—you'd have all the natives in a ferment directly. Why the Government wouldn't hear of it!'

'We do not *want* the Government to hear of it,' said the Chela.

'You can't seriously mean that you are going out to deliberately lower our nation in the eyes of the heathen by encouraging them in their idolatrous practices?' cried Mrs. Staniland, 'after all we've spent for years and years on mission funds! Mr. Ronald Campion, I can hardly believe that even you will do that!'

Sybil was trembling. 'Don't go, Ronald,' she entreated. 'Don't trust yourself far away alone with that wicked creature. It will play you false. Oh, for my sake, don't go!'

'You don't know all, darling,' said Campion, 'if what Nebelsen tells me is true, I *must* go. Mrs. Staniland, Colonel Elsworth, do you suppose I don't see the risk, and the absurdity, and—well—the impropriety of this

journey? Do you think I shall enjoy my voyage? I have to go, and I shall go—and there's no use saying any more about it!'

He was prepared to make ever such an ass of himself rather than risk any harm to Sybil's dear head.

Babcock burst into a sneering laugh. 'You may have pressing reasons for getting beyond the jurisdiction,' he said, 'but I doubt if you and the idol will get much farther than Monaco.'

'Ach!' retorted Nebelsen, 'even now you do not beleaf!'

'Well,' said Babcock, 'there may be a ghostly tirthankar ramping about in Campion's studio, but we've only your word for it!'

'It is only through two doors,' said the Chela, 'go and see for yourself if you dare!'

'Thanks very much,' said Babcock, 'but it's no business of mine. I see no necessity for moving. Perhaps the Colonel—will you step down and see Bogie, eh, Colonel?'

'I will not, sir,' said the Colonel testily; 'I don't give any opinion one way or the other—but unless I proposed to face that thing, I see nothing very courageous in sneering at it behind its back. I wish it was over somehow.'

'Let us go, Nebelsen,' said Campion, but Sybil stopped them.

'Oh, think first what you are going to do!' she cried. 'Herr Nebelsen, how can it be right to lend yourselves to help that idol to deceive more people. What good can ever come of it?'

'No goot,' said Nebelsen, 'it is the only way, that is all.'

'There are other ways,' she rejoined, 'if you have not been mistaken in your own powers. Didn't you tell us there were magnetic currents along which you could send things for immense distances wherever you wished? Why can't you send him by one of those?'

'He does not want to go that way,' said the Chela, 'and it is not surbrising, for you see I haf not had great bractice with the gurrents; sometimes they will not altogether vork, and the magnetical force stream will into gontact with some oder com, and so the body which was committed to it is not found to arrive, but instead flies off into trackless Gosmic space-regions.'

'But that wouldn't matter to *us*!' said Sybil, 'it would be all the better—he couldn't do any harm in trackless space!'

'Nebelsen,' said Campion, 'you know how far your powers go, but it seems to me this accomplishment gives you the upper hand of the idol altogether. Why, you can project him where you like—to Fusi-yama, Chimborazo, the North Pole, anywhere—and if he goes off the track, why, that's *his* affair!'

Nebelsen hung back. 'I am sure my Mahatma would not approve,' he objected.

'If he approved of your plan, he'll approve of this,' said Campion, impatiently; 'come back with me now, Nebelsen, and do it.'

The Chela pulled himself together. 'What I can I will do,' he said, 'I cannot do any more—let us go.'

Without trusting himself to speak to Sybil, Campion left the room with Nebelsen. There was a little passage between the door they had left and that which opened upon the painting-room, and in this passage Campion felt himself seized violently by the arm, and heard Nebelsen whisper through the gloom—

'I could not tell *her*,' he said in the greatest agitation, 'this thing what she wants me to do . . . but—but——'

'But what?' said Campion, as he hesitated painfully.

'I can treaten at him, of gourse, and if you wish it, I will—but if he takes me at the vort—*I haf quite forgotten how it is done!*'

Campion gave a short laugh. 'Well, we're in for it now, Nebelsen,' he said drily, 'and under the circumstances, I think I'll ask you to go in first.'

CHAPTER XVII.

BRUTUM FULMEN.

CAMPION'S state of mind as he followed Nebelsen down into the painting room was curiously contradictory; he could not divest himself of a feeling of awe at what he might be confronted with in another moment; at the same time he had an angry suspicion that he was being made a fool of. He could see nothing, for it was almost as dark as night, and besides, a large folding screen stood at the foot of the steps intercepting his view. Behind this screen Nebelsen made a fresh stand. 'There is yet anoder thing,' he whispered, 'to transbort that idol he must first be in the hands taken!'

'Well,' said Campion, 'I'll fetch it for you, if that's all.'

'But you don't understandt!' exclaimed Nebelsen, 'that is shust a thing what the tirthankar will never bermit!'

'Well, we can't skulk behind here much longer,' said Campion, recklessly, 'let us come out in the open and have it out with whatever it is that's there! Never mind if you can *do* the thing or not, Nebelsen, *tell* him you will, and see if bluster won't make him climb down!'

'So—I will bloster as goot as I can,' said the Chela, 'but my plan was bedder.'

And Campion, not without a sense of shame, came out and stepped instinctively inside the charcoal diagram on the floor, '*il ne croyait pas*,' perhaps, '*mais il craignait*,' in spite of himself.

Through the open north window the sky showed a deep and murky red, and in the intense gloom below he could just make out the form of the idol squatting on a chair in the corner, its head and one shoulder touched by such light as there was. It seemed to sit there in deadly composure, like some cold, venomous creature pausing to strike more surely, and though he could see no sign of any other presence in the room, he had a consciousness which he could not account for that something malign was watching there in the shadow.

Nebelsen seemed to have braced his nerves completely. 'See!' he cried, with an accent almost of triumph, 'did I not tell you? And now you yourself can see!'

'What? where?' cried Campion, with an involuntary start.

'There—in the corner—behind the idol, floating cross-legged in the air as in your picture—there, with his evil grey face and the white eyes which so angrily roll!'

'I see nothing,' said Campion; and the Chela, gripping his friend's wrist in his cold fingers, began to roll out long and unintelligible words, which seemed to Campion to have a defiant ring in them.

'He is moved!' he cried, 'now you can see—you *must* see how he brandishes with his arms!'

But whether Campion's eyes saw any clearer than before will never be known for certain now—his lips have ever since been sealed upon the subject.

However this may be, there is at least no mystery as to what took place next. As the two men stood there, a shaft of intense light made a purplish glare on the darkness, and almost at the same instant the heavily-charged clouds overhead rushed together with an explosion which shook the earth, and the echo crashed, boomed, rolled, with sundry capricious relapses and recoveries, making a mad circuit, as it seemed, of the entire solar system, and then ceased abruptly with a far-off metallic clank—as though it had cannoned into Mars, whereupon the long stagnant air shivered and began to circulate once more.

Campion, on whose retina the jagged flash seemed indelibly branded, reeled back against a cabinet with a horrible fear that he had lost his eyesight—but from this he was presently relieved by seeing Sybil and the others around him.

'Oh,' cried Sybil, piteously, 'the lightning has struck him—I was sure it had!' But he was promptly able to reassure them.

'And is poor Mr. Nebelsen safe, too?' inquired Mrs. Staniland.

It had grown somewhat lighter and, on turning round, they all saw the Chela huddled up inside his mystic diagram, motionless, his face hidden in his arms.

'Oh, don't touch him!' cried Mrs. Staniland; 'don't let me see his face. . . . He's dead, I *know* he is!'

And the same thought seized them all—until the

Chela slowly rose with a dazed look. 'Where am I?' he stammered; 'ah, I remember. . . . I haf in a trance-state been. Mees Elsvort, your will is aggomplished. That so accursed idol is now safely on the top of Cotopaxi landed. I myself haf seen him arrive. For once the current has successfully worked!'

'My dear good Nebelsen,' said Babcock, from the other end of the room, 'I don't want to ask rude questions—but some of it at all events seems to have been left behind—look there!'

The chair on which the idol had lately been placed was now a blasted and collapsed wreck, and all around it were scattered half-fused fragments of some spar-like substance.

'See!' said Babcock, 'this looks like its ugly head, and here's a bit of its pedestal, with a sort of tiger scratched on it, and there's a foot and hand—looks as if it had got on the wrong current and run into something, Nebelsen, eh?'

The Chela folded his arms calmly, without appearing to be at all put out by this slight inconsistency. 'I remember now more clearly,' he said; 'the other was a vision only. I treaten him with Cotopaxi—and it was enoff. He threw up his cardsgame, and in despair he invoked that light-ning—and then, as you see, was shaddered into pieces.'

'And where is the—the gentleman himself now?' inquired the Colonel, who had certainly lost some of his colour.

'The false tirthankar-geist?' said Nebelsen. 'Oh, now that there is no longer his idol to care for, he cannot any-

more hold together. He is dissolved, degombosed, and once again into the mighty Magrogosm reabsorbed.'

'And a deuced good thing too!' said the Colonel. A conclusion with which few, perhaps, will be found to disagree.

What can be said of Nebelsen's theory? Had the spirit of this long dead Indian occultist used his old mastery over the powers of Nature to effect his final annihilation? Or had he intended to call down lightning to avenge him, and instead been hoist with his own petard? Or—an even more important point—had there ever been a ghostly tirthankar at all in attendance upon that particular idol, or was the story adapted to it by the dusky and esoteric Chowkydaree Loll? These are questions which everyone will decide for himself according to his own inclination and capacity for the marvellous, and, whatever flaws may exist in Nebelsen's theory, Campion has not as yet succeeded in finding a more plausible explanation of his mysterious woes—though, to be sure, this may be due to the fact that he has never troubled himself to try.

Sybil, at all events, was not inclined just then to underrate Nebelsen's services. She went to him and held out her hand. 'We are very grateful to you,' she said smiling.

'It is noding,' said the Chela, with becoming modesty, 'at least—it was not moch.'

Babcock put on his glasses. 'You'll excuse my impertinent curiosity,' he said, 'but even now I can't quite gather what it was you *did* do?'

'I did those,' he said, proudly indicating the shattered idol.

'Unless you mean that you ordered the thunderstorm —in which case no one of course can very well contradict you,' said Babcock, 'that strikes me as rather a strong assertion. Come, isn't it just barely possible that that palette knife I see on the floor there attracted the lightning?'

'I will not reply to such absurt and fanciful subosition,' said Nebelsen with much dignity.

'Well, I must say,' said the Colonel, who now that it was lighter and the storm was already growling in the distance, had veered round to his former incredulity, 'that seems a plain straightforward way to account for it. Fact is, all this thunder in the air upset our nerves a bit, don't you think so, Mr. Campion?'

Campion laid his hand on Nebelsen's shoulder. 'I don't know,' he said; 'I was frightened enough just now. I can't pooh-pooh the danger quite so soon, I want a little more time before I forget all the trouble Mr. Nebelsen took on my behalf.'

'Gleichviel,' said the Chela, 'so you are safed, what madder whose is the gredit? But now,' he added, 'I must say goodbye, and for efer. Yes, I am going to dravel far away, to find my beloved Mahatma.'

'I understood you weren't on speaking terms?' said Babcock.

'Through your monkey drick, for a time I lost gonfidence!' retorted Nebelsen, 'and even so rash and strong-headed as to renounce him became. My guru, who was

harsh and severe perhaps, but nefer more than I deserved that he was! But' (and here he addressed Sybil and Campion) 'it is a strainch thing, and you hartly will gombrehend how it could be—yet it is quite true. I wride a ledder, a broud shtiff ledder, in which I formally renounced my goot old Mahatma—who had nefer done noding, and this ledder I broject for myself by the occult telegraph. Well, will you beleaf that, only last night, I find that very same ledder in my bocket unopen! Mr. Chowkydaree, who is a great adept, as you know, tolt me he has very grand reason to think it quite brobable as my revered guru nefer received it at all! If so, he knows noding, and it is all well—but, ach! I have a need to gonfess and tell him all, and for that I must myself see him. Gommunications through a more advanced theosophist as Mr. Loll—well, they are not so brivate. And the Babu himself quite agrees—he is anxious for me to go and seek my Mahatma for myself far away in Thibet, and he wishes very moch that I find him, and I also—for Thibet you know is large and my Mahatma a leedle—what you call, shy—I may haf to hunt a long while.'

'And when do you start?' asked Campion, who secretly shared the Chela's last apprehension.

'To-night—it is not goot for me hier gontending with the maleficent forces of so much gombined incredulousness. I long to throw myself upon the galm bosom of Shang-gasba, my guru, and find strength for the spirituous tests I must som day undergo. And I want to be alone and do som thinking. So, my dear Mees Elsvort, I wish you farewell. I beleaf you are going to haf now a happy.

earth-life. And, for successive ingarnations, it must surely be that one so gracious and so schweet will ever bedder and bedder Karma generate. But think somtimes of me as I go up along my thorn-springled climb-road to gomblete initiation, and pardon me that I shall not dare, for a time at least, to think of you!'

He raised her hand in both his and kissed it, and as he did so there was a moisture in his pale eyes which, it may be feared, was not the result of any esoteric exaltation.

The next minute, without deigning to take leave of any but the two lovers, he had vanished out of their lives, and no one—unless haply the brothers at Bombay,—knows what has become of him since, or whether he is still stalking his somewhat *farouche* Mahatma in the mountain fastnesses of far Thibet.

'Now, Mr. Campion,' said Mrs. Staniland, 'a few words with you, please!' And he left Sybil and crossed to where the old lady stood, looking both grim and embarrassed. 'I see from my passbook,' she began, 'that you do not seem to have presented the cheque I sent you for my niece's portrait. Has it miscarried?'

'I tore it up,' he said, curtly; and her face lightened.

'You felt—and very properly—that you would not be justified in accepting money for what you had done?'

'Not as you offered it.'

'Well, you decline at all events, and—and I should not dream of hurting your feelings by offering it to you again; but of course I can't keep the portrait now.'

'It is mine again!' he cried. 'Ah! if you had only said so at once!'

'I did not know then about the cheque,' she said, with a deeper tint on her apple cheeks. 'And I was angry—and quite rightly—then. But it is understood, then—the whole transaction is at an end? I keep the money, and the portrait is yours to destroy as soon as it comes back from the Grosvenor. I don't wish, on calmer reflection, to perpetuate a work which can only damage your reputation in so many ways.'

'You are very considerate—if it comes a little late,' he said. And the truth was that Mrs. Staniland had been blaming herself for some time for paying so large a sum without necessity. She had bought with it the right to revenge, but revenge is too perishable a commodity to seem long an equivalent for hard cash.

Meanwhile Babcock was engaging the Colonel, blissfully unaware that he had already inspired that officer with a secret but cordial dislike. 'Of course,' he began, 'you and I, as men of the world, know what to think of all this tomfoolery; but, unless you put your foot down pretty firmly, I'm afraid, from all I've seen to-day, that your daughter may, ah—allow herself to be impressed by it!'

'You may leave that to me, sir,' said the Colonel, with a little movement of weak irritation, for he felt no anxiety to put his foot down on Babcock's behalf, and yet he foresaw that he might be obliged to do so.

Babcock was astute enough to have discovered already that, whatever chances he might have had with Sybil

had been hopelessly lost in the course of the morning, and he now devoted all his energies to upsetting his rival.

'You don't seem to understand, Colonel,' he said, 'that, unless you are careful, you will have Sybil flinging herself away on that scoundrel over there; but perhaps that wouldn't displease you?'

'I should most certainly put a stop to anything of the kind,' said the Colonel coldly, 'so you need give yourself no further trouble. But, as far as the young fellow himself is concerned, he seems to me a gentlemanly, nice young fellow enough. What have you got against him?'

'I should have thought there was enough against him; and I don't see myself how all the occult hanky-panky in the world can whitewash him,' said Babcock waspishly. 'I think I've some reason to bear a grudge against him, too. He deliberately ruined the best picture I ever painted, or ever shall paint!'

And he told again his oft-repeated story of the fakir and the British landscape, which it so happened the Colonel had not till then heard in all its bearings, and which, as Babcock told it, made things look very black against his rival.

'You're right,' said the Colonel at the end of it, with a feeling that this would at least strengthen his case against Campion; 'that was a shabby thing to do—he's a dangerous fellow, and I must get rid of him.'

He crossed to where Campion was standing with Mrs. Staniland, and addressed him with a marked change in

his manner. 'We have had some extraordinary statements this morning,' he began, 'and we were required to accept them as excuses for your behaviour. But there can be no excuse for the disgraceful way in which you betrayed your friend Babcock—for he was your friend then; you have probably, he tells me, crippled his artistic career!'

'I can only say,' said Campion, 'that I did it in all innocence—if poor Nebelsen hasn't convinced you that some abnormal influence was over me, nothing I can say will. I offered to paint out the fakir as soon as I saw what I had done, but Babcock declined to let me touch it. And really, if he thought it was crippling his career, he would hardly let Sieditoff exhibit it by artificial light at a shilling a head!'

'You didn't tell me that!' said the Colonel to Babcock.

'Don't see how it affects what *he* did,' replied Babcock, rather sulkily.

'As I said,' Campion continued, 'I've as little to do with any credit for the thing as for any blame, as far as intention goes—but he might set off the one against the other, particularly as Sieditoff told me (without knowing I had any part in it) he had bought the picture entirely for the eccentricity of the thing.'

'Well, I must say,' said the Colonel, 'I think you might have mentioned it.'

And soon after this, Babcock, perceiving from the Colonel's manner that he had over-reached himself, withdrew, without even having the courage to try to conciliate Sybil, as he had promised himself he would do before he left.

'Well, Mr. Campion,' said the Colonel, 'I won't say —I can't say, that we may not have been led to misunderstand you in some respects. I don't mind admitting that, whatever may be said about—er, well, any alleged supernatural incidents, I can't take upon myself to consider you very greatly to blame in all this.'

'For *my* part,' said Mrs. Staniland, 'my opinion has not altered in the least—nor will it, Horace!'

'Ah—precisely,' he said hastily, 'I don't know that mine has—only, well, after all, Hilary!'

'What my brother is trying to say,' interrupted Mrs. Staniland, 'is that, though he is willing to admit there may be excuses for you (though I confess I can't agree with him), that cannot possibly affect his objections to any engagement with Sybil—he is quite firm upon that, are you not, Horace?'

'Quite firm—that is, well, you're not in a position to marry, you know, are you?' said the Colonel.

'But if I were to be so some day?' he hazarded eagerly.

'We will consider that when the day comes,' said Mrs. Staniland sharply. 'At present you're not—and we must decline to hear of it. "Sufficient for the day"—and I do think there has been more than sufficient! We are going, Sybil.'

'Good-bye, dear Ronald!' said Sybil, successfully ignoring her aunt's presence. 'If only you won't lose heart, they can't part us for very long! I feel so sure that now we have really seen the end of that detestable idol, you are not going to be unfortunate much longer. And then,

Ronald, you won't let any false pride stand in your way —you will come to me, and we shall be all the happier for what has been!'

'If it could only be so,' he said sadly. 'At least I will hope.'

And they took her away from him, and he was alone again, reduced to find such solace as he could in the memory of those last words and looks of hers.

Bales swept up the idol and committed it to its last dusthole. 'Talk o' lightning!' he grumbled, sceptical to the last, 'as if it hadn't something better to do than smashing himages! Don't tell *me*—did it himself with the poker, and would ha' done it earlier if he'd bin me! Well, here's riddance to bad rubbish, anyhow!' which was the idol's sole epitaph.

And now Campion was confronted with a fresh dilemma, the parting legacy of his ruthless tormentor. What was he to do about the cast that Perceval had lent him with so many cautions? That precious head of Cybele, which was now submerged, in the idol's stead, at the bottom of the Paddington canal!

There was no use in putting it off. He must go to his friend at once and, at the risk of displeasing him seriously, tell him, well—as much of the truth as he was likely to believe. So he left the house with this laudable intention, which, however, an accident prevented him from putting into practice.

For on the way he passed a police station—not the one which had extended its hospitality to him on the night before—and outside was a placard describing the

discovery in the canal of a bag which struck him as being not unlike his own.

And, as he learnt inside, it *was* his own; it seemed that the solitary errand-boy whose back was turned when Campion threw the bag over the bridge, had been attracted by the splash, and, being a sharp youth, had instantly informed a policeman, with the result that the bag was recovered before its contents were in any way injured.

Campion had to go through some unpleasant interviews before he could persuade the officials to give him up the bag; but he succeeded at length, and Perceval, when his Cybele was restored to him, never had the faintest suspicion that it had played *Gilda* to Campion's *Rigoletto*.

Whether the idol's share in a series of disasters was or was not imaginary, it is certain and somewhat singular that its disappearance was coincident with the dawn of a happier state of things. The very next morning brought a telegram from Messrs. Moore, Bradshaw, and Moore, who, it may be remembered, were the firm employed in propounding the will under which, had it only been unopposed, Campion would be entitled to a comfortable legacy.

This telegram announced that (probably from some unsuspected weakness in the disputant's case) the opposition had suddenly collapsed, and submitted an agreement under which all imputations were to be withdrawn on certain terms, and the will admitted to probate; and thus Campion found that the legacy which he had long since

given up as hopeless was actually to be his without further dispute or possibility of failure.

It need not be said he lost no time in writing to the Colonel, and when Babcock heard of this, and perceived decided symptoms of wavering on the father's part, he was roused to make one last effort for what even he was beginning to see was a decidedly forlorn hope. His plan was simple, and a development in fact of the experiment in his own studio. The Colonel was to be worked up to pay a visit to the Grosvenor and see for himself how shamefully his daughter had been held up to public ridicule. If that did not put a spoke in his rival's wheel, Babcock thought, it must roll on triumphant.

Mrs. Staniland, still an uncompromising ally of his, had no difficulty in bringing her brother to further the scheme, and accordingly on the Monday after the scene in Campion's studio, the Colonel casually announced at lunch that he thought of going to the Grosvenor that afternoon—would Sybil come with him? Mrs. Staniland interposed—Sybil was not strong enough to bear such a trial again. Dear Horace must not think of taking her; she herself would accompany him instead.

For the moment Sybil was willing enough to be excused. But the thought that she might show her trust in her lover by going nerved her to face that mocking portrait once more. It was not his work, and she would tell them so as they stood before it. She would not fail in her loyalty to Ronald, the more so as she suspected the source from which the proposition originally came.

So on that Monday afternoon, for the first time since

that eventful Saturday, she entered the Gallery—this time with a mind prepared for what she was to see there. 'You know, Papa dear,' she said, as they went upstairs, 'painters see people so differently, and—and oh! if you find something you don't like in it, remember Ronald was painting the idol too!'

'Pshaw!' said the Colonel, whose mind had quite regained its usual strength. 'Where is this thing, eh, Sybil? I'll tell you what I think when I see it.'

Mrs. Staniland declined to enter the East Gallery, and sat down to wait in the larger room. So Sybil went with her father alone; she wished herself well over the next five minutes—would people stare and smile as they had done that other time? But now that she knew, or rather felt, that Ronald had no part in this, for his sake she could bear it all—she would make excuses, persuade the Colonel, if she could, that the picture rather flattered her than otherwise—anything but seem to join, even by implication, in the cry against her poor, persecuted Ronald.

The Gallery was not, of course, as full as when she had last seen it; still there was a fair attendance, and ah! —again there was a knot of people before her portrait! She turned faint for the moment—she felt as if she could *not* face it.

But she was brave, and steeled herself to go on. Once more the glass in front of the canvas baffled them for a time, and then her courage failed her—she shut her eyes.

'Well,' her father was saying, 'I don't call that such a bad likeness; I call it an uncommon good likeness, by Jove! what did your aunt mean?'

Sybil ventured to open her eyes again. What wonderful thing was this which happened? The idol was gone out of the canvas; on the dragon pedestal lay a spray of white azaleas, and she herself—oh! could she be as lovely as that!

For the pictured face had the bloom of youth and health; the cold malignity had died out of the eyes, and left only a subdued amusement; the expression, with all its animation and witchery, spoke of nothing that was not womanly, and tender, and true.

As Sybil stood there, trying to realise what had happened, and what it might mean, Mrs. Staniland rejoined them.

'Horace,' she said, 'what do you think I just happened to overhear? You know the Dorados? American millionaire—daughter going to marry Lord Udimore—oh, don't be so stupid, you *must* have heard of them. At any rate, you have now! Well, they were sitting next to me in the other room, and I actually heard them—they spoke so loud—arranging that Miss Dorado's portrait should be painted on her marriage—by whom do you think? Positively by Mr. Ronald Campion! Why, it may make his fortune, and yet one would think they must have seen——Why, what, *who* is this?'

'It's Ronald's idea of me,' said Sybil demurely,—'as I appear without my idol.'

'Good gracious!' was all that Mrs. Staniland felt equal to remarking for the moment, but presently she said to the Colonel in a very awed and serious tone, 'Horace, I have always felt that there may be occurrences

we, with our limited knowledge, cannot expect to understand. I assure you when I last saw this picture—and now as soon as the actual idol is destroyed, the portrait is everything it ought to be! If you see no significance in that, I am sorry for you! You have treated that young man very badly, Horace, and I think it right to tell you so plainly.'

But the reason of the alteration which had worked such a reaction in Mrs. Staniland's feelings was, in point of fact, a perfectly simple and straightforward one.

Now that the picture was his once more, Campion could retouch it as he pleased, and, by bringing special influence to bear, had obtained the necessary permission, and, accordingly, the day before, when the Gallery was closed even to Sunday parties, had spent some happy hours in restoring the canvas to its original condition.

And now, on this Monday afternoon, the fancy seized him to go and see how his rehabilitated portrait looked, and it chanced that, at the moment the Colonel was trying to adjust his views to meet his sister's sudden change of front, he saw Campion himself enter the gallery.

They had withdrawn some distance from Sybil, and her back was turned to them all three. Mrs. Staniland made a signal that he was to approach, and he went up with an anxious heart.

'Am I to have my answer—here?' he said.

'Why—you see,' began the Colonel, who had not had time to learn his lesson yet, and boggled helplessly, 'you see, Mr. Campion——'

'Nonsense, Horace! you had better leave this to me,' said Mrs. Staniland. 'Now, Mr. Ronald Campion, if you're so very anxious to have your answer at once, the best advice I can give you is to go over there, and ask Sybil yourself for it!'

And he went; and the answer that awaited him being a foregone conclusion, it is only necessary to add that the tale of Campion's misfortunes ended almost where it began, with as small prospect of ever being resumed as his sincerest well-wishers could desire for him.

THE END

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